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Illustration:MID



招かれざる帰還

2





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# **Rain**

— レイン —


## **- Volume 2 - Uninvited Return**

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**[ Rainy Translations ]**





今更ながらに、  
少年の仲間がどつとレインを襲った。  
その黒いローブの群れを、  
右へ左へと稲でも刈るように魔剣で薙ぎ、  
レイン自身も味方の陣へ叫んでよこす。  
「おまえらはそこで防御に専念しろ！  
こいつらは俺が片づけるっ」



「レイン君――」。

この先、自分の行いに迷いが生じることがあったら、  
これから私が言う言葉を思い出してほしい。

今から話すことは、絶対に正しいことなのだから」







## 主な登場人物



【ユーリ】  
レインの仲間



【セノア】  
レインの副官



【レニ】  
レインの副官



【ガサラム】  
レインの古い知り合い



【ギュンター】  
レインの腹心。主に諜報を担当



【セルフィー】  
騎士志願の貧乏少女



【サフィール】  
上將軍の一人



【ナイゼル】  
ラルファスの副官



【グエン】  
ラルファスの副官



【ホーク】  
伝説の騎士



【シング】  
シャンドリスの將軍



【フォルニア】  
シャンドリスの皇帝

### レイン

本編の主人公。本人曰く、  
「傲岸不遜と常勝不敗が  
売りの、世界最強の男」



### ラルファス

レインの親友で、  
サンクワールの上將軍



### シェルファ

サンクワールの姫君。  
レインに好意を  
寄せている



### ジョウ

シャンドリスの大將軍



# PROLOGUE

---

“As I’d expected, that man was a wolf.”

That was the grand general’s response to knight-captain Shing’s latest news about the neighboring kingdom, Sunkwoll.

Anyone could tell that Joe Lamberck, a hero who was known to all in this kingdom, Chandrys, and was called the “Fearless God-General” in other countries, was not an ordinary man with one glance.

He had emerald eyes, flawlessly white skin despite the numerous times he had been through the tumult of war, and a kind visage that appeared to perfectly convey his character.

His silvery hair glistened under the light that filtered through the window.

He was so beautiful that even Shing, a military man, fought the urge to sigh. In other words, it was impossible to fathom Joe’s actual status from just his outer appearance.

However——in truth, Joe was a warrior with a long military history who had not known defeat for the past several decades, and a knight to boot.

*(Just how old is this gentleman?)*

A question that had flit across Shing’s mind on many occasions came to mind yet again. No matter how hard he looked, the other man only looked to be around his twenties—

“Shing, is there anything else to report?”

“Sir!”

Shing gently shook his head clear of any stray thoughts. *It doesn’t matter. I respect this man from the bottom of my heart... That’s enough for me.*

“Continuing my report... Sunkwoll has escaped danger for the time being thanks to Sir



Rain's efforts. From here on out, the princess will be rebuilding the kingdom with his and Sir Ralphus', the other surviving high general's, support."

"Oh...? So he's finally risen from being a sore sight for the king to a pillar of the kingdom.... Though it's only to be expected of him."

Joe leaned against the window of his personal chambers and lightly crossed his arms. Even this everyday action was enchantingly captivating when he performed it. To put it simply, each and every action of his was beautiful.

Shing subconsciously let out a sigh and timidly asked,

"um, Lord Joe? There's something that I've wanted to ask you for a while, but——"

"Let's hear it."

"Of course. Well... you seem to be very taken with Sir Rain for some reason, so I was wondering why that was."

"...Was it written all over my face?"

Joe smiled wryly. He continued,

"have you always noticed, Shing?"

"Ye, yes, sir... Please forgive me if I hurt your feelings."

Indeed, Shing had long since noticed Joe's strange attitude toward Rain. Joe was a kind and compassionate grand general, but he rarely ever smiled. He was always rather aloof and hardly ever changed his expression.

And yet, whenever he happened to hear Rain's name in conversation, the edges of his lips would curl up a little. His smile was like ripples breaking across an otherwise still lake, and Shing had always wondered about it.

"I don't mind. It's not something I was meaning to keep secret.... Basically, I've met him before."

"Are you acquainted with him?!"



“I wouldn’t say that. After all, we’ve only met once and that was ten years ago.”

“Then, perhaps the two of you shared a conversation——”

“No,”

Joe denied right off the bat and looked to somewhere far away. He continued,

“Shing, can you believe this? I have once trembled from head to toe because I had a premonition of my defeat...”

“Never!”

Shing promptly denied.

That was the one thing that he could never believe was possible.

“But it’s true.... I have never before in my long life felt that I was so inexperienced as I had then.”

“Impossible... Did you cross blades with Sir Rain?”

“I did not. Our eyes simply met for a brief moment.”

“...I beg your pardon?”

“For us, even that was enough,”

Joe asserted, clearly away any remaining doubts, and continued in a whisper.

“I still see the boy I saw that day in my dreams. The quiet boy standing tall in all-black garb. He glared at me silently with a face as still as death... ‘His eyes are like a wolf’s,’ I thought as I looked into his black eyes. From them, I felt a noble sense of solitude and strength that would bow down to none.”

“I see...”

Shing could only respond vaguely.

To begin with, Joe’s description was not consistent with the rumors he had heard.



The man called Rain was a braggart who could not walk three steps without talking big about himself, drank liquor at any chance he had, was highly uncooperative with his colleagues, always ignored his orders, and was an incorrigible philanderer to boot——at least according to the rumors... His rumors painted him in a completely different light than what Joe made him out to be.

According to the rumors, he was a simple drunkard.

However, Shing, who held Joe in the highest esteem, refrained from saying anything. *No, if Lord Joe says so, then the rumors must be wrong... probably.*

“By the way, Shing.”

“Ye, yes, sir?”

“You know that Her Majesty is hesitating over whether or not to form an alliance with Sunkwoll, right?”

“I do... Since we will not be able to avoid fighting with Zarmine, it’s better to have as many allies as possible.”

“Indeed. Soon, we’ll be sending an emissary over to see if they’re worthy of forming an alliance with——

*“And I plan on being that emissary.”*

Shing, who wasn’t listening very intently at first, jumped at Joe’s last few words.

“Y, you intend on going there yourself, Lord Joe?!”

“I do.”

Joe immersed himself in his thoughts after assenting.



*It's been ten years... I wonder how much stronger the boy from back then has become?*

*I simply must see for myself.*

*——Indeed, for my own sake as well.*

# CHAPTER 1

## THE GIRL WHO DREAMS

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### PART 1

*Well, it's time to make you dreams come true, Selphie!*

*– The royal castle of Sunkwoll, Galfort Castle. –*

A young girl was pumping herself up in front of the castle gates.

She had long black hair that was slightly wavy and light green eyes. She was clearly a Sunkwoll commoner. She had a pretty face that attracted passersby, but her beauty had unfortunately been reduced by thirty percent because of her shabby appearance.

Her pink blouse was discolored from being washed one too many times, and a closer look at her somewhat short, off-white skirt revealed that it had been patched up at one spot. Moreover, the sack that she carried across her back looked like it would burst open at the seams at any moment.

There was one thing that was strange about her.

She had a sword belt attached to her skirt for some reason, despite the fact that she was still a young girl, and an unbecoming longsword was hanging from her waist. In addition, the coating of the sword's scabbard was discolored and peeling.

The girl perfectly personified the word 'poor' with her entire being, if you excluded the fact that she was armed.

Even still, each and every castle affiliate who passed through the gates glanced over at her from the corner of their eye. This was because her appearance was still worth the look.

Still, anyone who saw her could tell that she was not just a doll.



The light of a tenacious will flickered in her large, beautiful eyes. This light in and of itself was her true nature.

*(My dream will finally come true... I have to do my best, and I absolutely have to pass. I'm definitely gonna become a knight!)*

She stood bolt upright at the gates for a short while. Then, Selphie faced forward, her eyes teary from nervousness and inspiration, and was about to take her commemorated first step.

But, she suddenly broke out in goosebumps.

A prickly feeling that made her feel as if icicles had formed on her body... an overwhelming sense of intimidation. She had never felt this kind of pressure even from the master of the dojo that she had attended. She even felt as if the sun itself, which had been shining down on her, had suddenly gone out.

In actuality, Selphie had not thought things through for very long, and her body had reacted before she could even think, “oh no!” Due to the rigorous sword training she had endured day after day, her hands had moved before she could think.

The senses she had honed at the dojo had not rusted, and she was a bit of a birdbrain, too. In any case——

Selphie drew the sword at her waist so fast that her eyes could not follow and brandished it horizontally to her side as she spun around.

*(Kyaah!! This isn't even a wooden sword!)*

A very realistic set of images jumbled up together in her mind.

Those images were namely of the unfortunate layperson who would soon become a bloody mess rolling around the streets just because they had been standing behind her. Never mind the knight's exam, Selphie thought that she would be going directly to prison... No, she might even be sentenced to death for this.

However, it was Selphie's arrogance that had conjured up these images. After all, there was no way that an ordinary layperson could release such pressure.

By the time that Selphie had resolved herself, thinking, *there's no way I can stop this, I'm gonna slash right through him*——

The wind suddenly danced around her and gently picked up her bangs.

A bluish light that shone brighter than the sun reflected off of Selphie's eyes.

“...Eek!”

There was no other outcome that could have surprised her more than this.

She couldn't help but let out a hoarse scream at the magical sword... the magic sword that had come up to her neck like a magic trick before she knew it.

*No way!*

She wanted to shriek those words with her trembling lips.

The tall man before her eyes had not moved a finger until the very last moments before her attack had hit.

She had definitely seen him simply standing there.

*So how did he manage to unsheathe his sword (and a magic sword at that!) and press it up against me right at the last moment?! Is he really just that much faster than me? B, but I worked so hard on my sword skills, too!*

There was another thing that surprised her.

Her opponent had not moved to dodge her blow.

Selphie's attack had been intercepted by the man's left hand. He had managed to splendidly stop her sword by grabbing the blade with his fingers.

And, the magic sword in his right hand was pressed up against her throat. A bluish-white light enveloped the entire blade, likely because of the powerful magic imbued within it, and it reverberated with a hum like the buzzing of numerous winged insects.

The sword could have easily cut through one or two skinny girls who had not had much to eat in a single blow.



For some reason, the man ignored Selphie as she stood in a daze, dumbfounded in more ways than one, and drew out a long sigh. Then, looking almost drunk, he slowly shook his head from side to side.

“To think that I’d already mastered the “one-handed sword grab” after using it just once before——”

After a slight pause, he continued in a tone that suggested that he simply could not bear to keep his emotions to himself,

“——I’m a genius! Sometimes, my own genius ability amazes me...”

*Are, are you showing off?!?*

Selphie’s nerves began to unwind all at once.

“Hey! You there!”

the man continued as he suddenly returned to normal and glared at Selphie’s direction. His glare was extraordinarily intense.

*(He, he’s scary!)*

Selphie instinctively dropped her sword and shrank away... or rather, she tripped over a rock and fell back on her bottom.

“What’s the big idea with slashing at me all of a sudden?! If you weren’t a girl, I’d have sent you flying ten meters in the air with a bloody nose——”

Suddenly breaking off his threat, the man abruptly looked down at Selphie sprawled out on the floor and remained silent. His irked expression changed into an extremely serious one.

Thanks to his change in attitude, Selphie was finally able to observe the tall man at her leisure.

He wore black pants and a similarly black shirt, and even his boots were black. Since his hair and eyes were black too, he was covered in black from head to toe.

Selphie didn’t know if that was his fashion sense or if he simply didn’t care enough to

groom it, but his black hair was lazily done and stuck out here and there. His manly face looked incredibly daring, and a brazen smile crept at the edge of his lips from time to time.

*There is nothing in the world that I fear...* He looked as if was silently declaring this statement.

Selphie felt as if a large beast, such as a lion or a wolf, had appeared and was looking down at her.

As if he was saying, *will she be my lunch?*

The man re-sheathed his magic sword while keeping his eyes fixed down at a certain level and muttered,

“an orthodox white, huh...”

“...Eh? Ah, no way!!”

Selphie blushed furiously as her cheeks began to burn.

She stood up with a jolt and pulled down at the hem of her skirt.

“It’s a little too late to cover it up now.”

“Y, you’re horrible! You’re so mean! Why didn’t you warn me?! Or pretend that you didn’t see?! You’re a pervert!”

“Stop being stupid!”

The man shouted in thunderous indignation. He continued,

“if you have the chance to look at a girl’s underwear, it’s obvious that you’re supposed to take it! What kind of idiot would warn the girl instead?!”

He spoke with such force that Selphie was overwhelmed for a moment.

Passersby had stopped walking to see what the commotion was, and they were stunned into silence by his unabashed claims. One look at the man’s face told Selphie that he harbored no guilt over what he had just said and that he believed his words



without a single doubt. He was so self-justified that Selphie almost found herself nodding in agreement.

“And for starters,”

he continued his claims,

“when I was a kid, I’d create those opportunities for myself if I didn’t get any, you see!”

“——Doesn’t that just mean that you went around lifting people’s skirts?!”

Selphie retorted after she had recovered.

However, the man took no notice of her and continued,

“at the end of the day, that’s what makes a man a man. Hey, you there, you agree with me, right?!”

He suddenly jabbed a finger at the gatekeeper’s direction.

“Eh, are, are you asking me?”

The gatekeeper was still young enough to be mistaken for a kid, and he began to backpedal for some reason. He was wearing the uniform of a squire and had a lance in his hand.

“Yeah. You. You wouldn’t just let a chance like that go by if you’re a man, right?”

“I, I, well... I couldn’t really see anything from where I was standing... So...”

“Hey, you,”

the man said as he grasped the poor youth by the shoulder. He continued,

“what’s your name?”

“...Did you forget, sir? It’s me, Miran. I introduced myself to you just a little while back.”

“Never heard of that name before!”

The man decisively cut the youth off and peered into his face. He continued,

“anyway, there’s this super scary story that I know; care to hear it?”

“I’ve already heard that story, sir! It’s the story about M, who got on his liege’s bad side, right? Okay, I get it! I agree! Yeah, I’d look if there was a girl sprawled out over on the ground! It’s just as you say, General!”

the youth wailed on the verge of tears. He had said most of his piece in desperation. Selphie did not quite understand what was going on, but she gathered that the youth had had a similar encounter with the man before. Although the man in question seemed to have forgotten the incident entirely.

*No... I don't really care about that.*

*I just heard something outrageous right now——*

“Ge, general!?”

All of her anger vanished in an instant.

Selphie hurriedly picked up and re-sheathed her sword in a panic. She continued,

“are you... the lord general?”

“Pft... Well, yeah. I’m the one and only Rain, the high general known throughout this kingdom himself.”

The man... or rather, Rain brushed back his hair in one smooth motion.

“Eh, ehh~!”

*Wha, what do I do?!* Selphie felt as if the blood was draining from her body.

*Of all people, he’s the person who’ll be proctoring the exam. A, and to think that he was the rumored Lord Rain!*

Rain left Miran back at the gates and earnestly stared at Selphie from head to toe,



observing her as she panicked.

“Come to think of it, what’s with you? Do you have a grudge against me or something? I’m a man who’s sweet to girls before all else. I don’t remember doing anything to deserve being cut down out of nowhere.”

“Ah, that’s...! I, I suddenly felt chills when I sensed your presence, General, and... Argh, what am I saying?!”

Mysteriously enough, Rain’s expression softened up a little after hearing her chew on her words and mumble to herself.

“Oh...? You felt my ‘power,’ did you now? You have some promise.... Though you’re still pretty weak from my point of view.”

“Really?!”

Ignoring the second half of what Rain had said, Selphie jumped at the part about “having some promise.” Then, she began to rattle on,

“I’m here to take the Official Knight Recruitment Exam! I made sure to hand in my application beforehand! M, my name’s Selphie, and I was born here in this town. I want to become a knight to matter what! I’m trying my hardest!”

When Selphie had finished her self-introduction as suddenly as she had begun it, Rain retorted,

“oh...? Well you’ve just had one hell of a great start, haven’t you, my examinee?”

“...Oh no.”

Selphie’s temporary ardor vanished at once. She continued,

“no way. I really didn’t know that you were Lord Rain.”

Selphie immediately found herself on the brink of tears, although she rarely ever cried in front of other people. While she could endure almost anything else (for example, her poverty), it was a different story when it came to her dreams.

*What will I do if he chases me away...?*

“Don’t cry, silly. Don’t worry, I’m not gonna fail you on the spot or anything.”

“...”

Rain nodded resolutely when Selphie looked up to him with upturned eyes as if she was silently asking, *really?* However——

“But calamity will befall you in the distant future if you fall from my good graces. Make sure you remember that!”

he warned.

“Ye, yessir!”

“It’s all fine and good as long as you understand! And it’s just about time, too. You should follow me.”

“Yes, General!”

Perking up at once, Selphie threw her sack across her back and followed after him. Although, the youth called Miran’s look that seemed to say, “someone outrageous is expecting something from you, huh,” bothered her somewhat.

Selphie toddled after Rain in small, quick steps as he strode through the castle gates.

It had been bound to happen because of the drastic difference in their gaits. However, after walking for a little while, Rain noticed that Selphie had fallen behind him and slowed down his pace.

“\*gasp, gasp\*... Thank you very much, General.”

“Hmph——”

Rain looked at Selphie out of the corner of his eye as she staggered with the sack on her back and murmured to himself in a smallish voice that was still loud enough for her to hear,

“low stamina, huh?... Minus twenty points.”

“Eh, ehh!? I, I’m fine! I actually super tough! See, look at how tough I am!”

In a feverish haste, Selphie began to run laps around the courtyard for no reason. The sack bounced up and down her back and a cloud of dust whipped up after her. She ran out of breath right about when she was done and immediately became completely exhausted. Then, she plopped down to the floor.

“I, I can still run... \*gasp, gasp\*”

“It’s getting annoying, so don’t, stupid.”

*He got mad at me.*

“It just makes your low stamina all the more obvious. I was just teasing you before, so don’t take me too seriously.”

“P, please don’t make fun of me like that... I’m already nervous because of the exam!”

“Just relax, silly, relax. It’s not like you’ll die if you don’t become a knight. And besides——”

Rain poked at the large sack and continued,

“what’s even in this thing. It’s way too big for your physique.”

“Um, my clothes and underwear and stuff. Basically, it’s stuff that I need for everyday life.”

When Selphie, who had finally stood up, replied, Rain responded,

“it’s not like you’re running away from home in the middle of the night or anything... Why’d you come here with all that?”

“Well that’s——”

If she became a squire, she would be allowed to lodge at the castle. She had prepared her things for that purpose, but she wasn’t very willing to explain the truth to Rain.

She was afraid that he would figure out the fact that she had been chased out of her house because she couldn’t pay her rent if she did. And besides, she didn’t want him

pitying her either.

“...Well, whatever.”

Fortunately, Rain did not press her for answers.

Then, he walked on and said with a gentle voice,

“anyway, hurry up as fast as you can. She’s gonna get on my case again.”

“Y, yessir!”

*Who’s “she?”*

Selphie was hesitant to ask something that could be perceived as impolite. And besides, she had the feeling that she would find out soon enough. Once they had cut through the courtyard and walked around the back of the palace and arrived at their destination, they were greeted with a square building that appeared to have been newly constructed.

“Is that the exam venue?”

“A venue, huh... That’s the arena that was established just recently. We just happen to be borrowing it for the exam.”

“An, an arena!?”

“Well no, it technically has a proper name. I just happened to forget what it was. It’s supposed to be a place where knights can practice their swordplay. It wasn’t a dojo... I really can’t recall what it was.”

Selphie nodded in vague confusion at Rain’s extremely lackadaisical explanation. Rain seemed to be a much more broad-minded person than he looked. She was also surprised at how much younger he looked than his supposed age (twenty-five).

Then again, Selphie was currently in no position to worry about that, and she soon found herself fully engrossed by the upcoming exam.

She began to feel nervous all over again.



A large crowd of men and women (mostly men) who appeared to be examinees were gathered by the entrance. Each and every one of them looked strong in their own right, and Selphie felt like they could easily push aside a 'poor, malnourished girl' like herself with one arm. In fact, in Selphie's eyes, they looked like they were all villains who had recently escaped from the dungeons. For example, they looked like criminals who had murdered several dozen people.

When she imagined this, Selphie became so frightened that she felt like she could die.

"Hey, what are you freezing up for? You're not a bride facing her wedding night, so relax, just relax. Everyone's scared, but it's only scary at first."

"Y, yessir! I'll do my best! It, it's only scary at first!"

More than half of Rain's joking had gone through one of Selphie's ears and out the other. She followed after Rain's black figure with awkward footsteps while trying her best to avoid looking at the assembly of scary fighters.

It seemed that she was the only dunce who had failed to recognize Rain on sight, as most of the other examinees opened up a path and saluted him. Rain gave them a smug nod and passed through.

Selphie chased after him like a child chasing after their parent and fled into the venue grounds. She ignored the soldiers stationed at either side of the entrance as they called out to her.

"\*sigh\*... That was so scary!"

She let out a sigh of relief after she finally set foot into safety.

"You..."

Rain began, exasperated.

"Yes?"

"Why the hell did you follow me in?! You're supposed to wait outside!"

"Ah, you, you're right! B, but!——"

*"Late! You're late, general!!"*

A shrill voice cut in and rescued Selphie from her state of panic.

*Wh, who's that!?*

When she quickly turned around, she saw a beautiful female noble, and a pure-blooded noble at that, with blonde hair and blue eyes standing upright before her. Anyone with noble blood in this kingdom (or at least anyone from a pure noble lineage) was distinctly marked with eyes that were blue all the to the sclera.

The noblewoman, covered in silver armor that had been polished to a shine, spread her legs a little apart and rested her hands atop a sword that was stuck upright in the ground.

She looked like an assistant instructor at a dojo who was reprimanding a lazy disciple, but lacked any real sense of gravity because the armor was too large for her.

Next to the armored beauty (which was what Selphie had decided to call her for the time being) was a troubled young man with short blond hair who also looked like a noble. He was in normal attire, and his eyes told Selphie that he probably wasn't a pure-blooded noble.

"You're late; you're barely made it on time! If a high general like you keeps acting like this, it will corrupt discipline inside and out!"

the armored beauty clamored with a voice as strict as her appearance.

Annoyed, Rain took one look at her and immediately became wholeheartedly displeased.

"You really never learn, do you."

"Whatever do you mean?"

Sensing the stormy mood, Selphie said,

“umm. I’ll just wait outside with the rest of the examinees.”

“We’re letting them in soon anyway. Just stay here.... It’s never a bad feeling to have more women nearby, even if you’re just a kid.”

“Is, is that so?”

Selphie felt as if Rain had said something incredibly rude. *This person probably has a lot of enemies*, she thought to herself. However, personally, she wasn’t all that angry with him. That might be because she knew of Rain’s achievements and had seen his strength with her own eyes.

She thought that surely, in order to have become so strong, he had had to endure hours upon hours of painfully hard effort.

“Hey...”

Rain walked up to the armored beauty and kicked her armor with the tip of his boots. Then, he continued,

“I told you to quit dressing up like that, Senoa!”

“P, please don’t kick it. It’s rude!”

“I don’t give a shit about being rude. Take it off right now!”

“It sounds kinda lewd when you say it like that,”

the other youth nonchalantly interjected.

Both parties ignored him because he had said something so senseless.

“And besides——”

Rain continued to say to the woman called Senoa in a very blunt manner,

“can you even walk in that, huh!?”

“Of, of course I can! What would I do if I couldn’t even walk...”

“Hey, you got real quiet at the end there! Then why don’t you try walking around a bit to prove it?”

“Why must I do that?”

“If you don’t, I’ll split that armor of yours right in two!”

Rain threatened with a hand placed on the hilt of his magic sword. Selphie had a feeling that he would actually make good on his threat, and Senoa appeared to be of the same opinion as the blood drained from her face.

“That’s not even funny! This armor is the Estherhart ancestral armor that has been handed down——”

“Just shut up and start walking!”

“Un, understood. I’ll walk, just you watch. It’s no big deal.”

Senoa took a deep breath as if she was resolving herself to her fate, slowly lifted up her feet, and began walking. At a first glance, her expression seemed to say, “I can walk just fine,” but the truth was evident before she had taken even five steps, as her white forehead began dripping with sweat.

It was even funnier because she tried to look like she wasn’t having any trouble at all. Her breathing had become ragged by the time she passed in front of Rain.

“Whoops, my foot slipped.”

Suddenly. Rain stuck out a leg.

“Aah!?”

With a loud crash, the clump of metal fell to the ground.

“What are you doingg?! I won’t forgive you for this today! How could you bring such shame upon an upper-class knight like myself——”

Senoa could not seem to get up no matter how much she squirmed around. She simply



bashed her arms and legs around blindly on the ground. She was stirring up a fuss, but could not manage to get up. From Selphie's point of view, it looked like the size and weight of Senoa's armor was to blame.

"Ugh! I, I can't get up..."

Senoa rolled here and there as she struggled to get up.

Looking down at her, Rain sighed and said,

"hey Leni.... Hurry up and strip her armor."

"Un, understood!"

The youth who had been standing off to the side... Leni's face was bright red, likely because he was trying too hard not to laugh.

## PART 2

He somehow managed to pry Senoa's armor off so that she could stand. She was understandably furious. Selphie thought that it was such a shame that her pretty face was twisted in anger.

"I prepared my armor on purpose so we could show the examinees some of our dignity,"

Senoa muttered in spite.

Rain mercilessly replied,

"you idiot! What use is armor if you can't even move in it? Learn the limits of your own abilities already. You useless fool!"

"Ugh... You didn't have to go that far..."

Senoa's eyes darted to and forth like she was wounded... until they finally rested on Selphie's.

"I was wondering, but who is this young lady?"

she began to vent her frustrations on the girl.

"Y, you mean me?"

"Oh yeah, she's——"

Rain continued, as if he couldn't have been any more bothered,

"she's an examinee I met just now by the castle gates. Says she wants to become a knight."

"Examinees are supposed to be waiting outside. Why is she here?"

Senoa pressed on without bothering to hide her displeasure. Selphie almost apologized on instinct, but Rain waved his hand like he was swatting at a fly before she could.

“Well, the mood brightens up when there are women around. And besides, it’s just about time anyway.”

“Yes, exactly. I don’t have any objections to cute young ladies being around either,”

Leni approved Rain’s statement with great zeal. He flashed a grin at Selphie at the same time. She tried to smile back at him, but she was sure that her face was extremely stiff.

“Sir Leni! That’s a controversial statement.”

“Enough, I say!”

Rain interrupted Senoa and continued,

“it’s time, so let’s get this over with and eat lunch. ——Hey!”

He raised his voice and signaled to the two soldiers stationed at the door.

“Yessir!”

Examinees poured in once the two soldiers saluted and opened the door wide.

“Alright, you go on over there too, Selphie.”

“Y, yessir!”

Selphie stiffly hurried back to where the rest of the examinees were as she was told.

“It doesn’t need to be perfect, so get organized into roughly four lines,”

Rain lazily called out, and about a hundred examinees obeyed and formed lines. Selphie, who had tried to line up at the very back, was jostled around by the crowd and found herself at the very front before she had realized. She was only a few steps away from Rain and his aides.

*Eek~, I, I’m so nervous~.*

*What will I do if they’re going to make it a tournament or something?*

Selphie was already drenched in sweat even though the exam hadn't begun yet.

After all, it wasn't only her dreams that were at stake. She couldn't help but be nervous because her livelihood was as stake as well.

The image of herself sleeping under a bridge after failing the exam and having her plans to stay at the castle lodgings go down the drain flickered before her eyes.

And, within ten days, she would have to stoop as low as to engage in night work... Well, she wasn't that much better off to begin with.

*"Um, won't you please buy me for a night?"*

*I definitely don't want this.*

*Oh, but, a girl as skinny as I am might not even be able to do something like that.*

*Aah, what on earth am I thinking?!*

*An, anyways just please don't make this a tournament... Tournaments are scary.*

Just as Selphie was secretly wishing to herself.

Leni turned to Rain and said,

"I suppose we'll be using a tournament to decide who passes, General?"

*I hate this person. I hate him!*

Selphie burned up in irrational rage.

Fortunately, however, Rain readily rejected the notion.

"Nah, I'm not about to do something so tedious when lunchtime's ticking closer."

Selphie felt the tension leave her cheeks.



*General, I, Selphie, will follow you anywhere.*

She truly felt this way, if only for now.

Completely indifferent to the girl who was staring at him with respect and gratitude, Rain took a cursory glance at the examinees and frowned.

“Whoa, they’re mostly gross men. Let’s get this over with as fast as possible.”

“Hold on a moment please, General!”

The atmosphere, which had relaxed somewhat after Rain’s energy-draining comment, tensed up again.

Blushing furiously, Senoa continued her interjection,

“please allow me to say a few words to the examinees before we begin.”

“Well... I won’t stop you if you insist, but...”

Without sparing a glance at Rain who was wearing an expression that seemed to say, “don’t, stupid,” Senoa said, “well then,” and opened her mouth wide to start.

“Everyone, at attention!”

A shrill voice roared in sharp rebuke.

After confirming that the examinees had reflexively moved to stand at attention, Senoa triumphantly began her speech.

*“Right now, our fatherland, Sunkwoll, faces unprecedented danger! It has only been a mere month since despicable Zarmine, the powerful kingdom from the North, invaded our country. We were able to repel their attack with great and strenuous effort, but should they invade us again, it is obvious that we knights, the cornerstone of our kingdom, must stand at the frontlines!”*

Selphie began to question why Senoa had referred to this speech as just a “few words,” while the words began to flow more naturally from Senoa’s mouth and she started to blush red (from apparent excitement).

*“Our enemy, King Leygur, is already recruiting more soldiers to replenish those that he lost and is steadily rebuilding and restructuring his army. It goes without saying that he is preparing for yet another battle. And thusly! We too must reinforce our military might and appoint more knights in preparation for the upcoming enemy invasion and—”*

It had come out of nowhere.

Without saying a word, Rain had hit the blonde beauty’s head with his scabbard and the full weight of the magic sword inside of it.

“Th, that hurt...”

It must have hurt a lot, since her blue eyes began to well up with tears.

“Of course it did, you fool! You said you’d just be saying a few words. So don’t just go off on a long-ass speech.”

“Oww, I feel a bump... I was almost done! And yet...!”

“Nope. I can’t bear to have my lunch wait for me any longer.”

With about eighty percent of his brain worried about his lunch, Rain put Senoa aside, turned to the hesitant examinees, and ordered,

“all of you, weapons at ready and turn to me! You can use any stance you like.”

*Clatter clatter clatter*

The examinees drew their weapons with confusion etched onto their faces. Then, they spread themselves out and aimed at Rain’s eyes just as he had ordered. There was even an exceptionally strong examinee who took up a battle axe high above his head.

Rain glanced through them and said,

“yep. That’ll do. We’ll begin the exam now.”

Tension ran through the air.

Naturally, Selphie, who stood at ready with a second-hand sword, was also nervous.

*He's not gonna tell us to come at him all at once, is he?*

On the contrary, Rain said,

“don't think of me as a high general of Sunkwoll. Think of me as your worst enemy! Then, in a moment, I want you to psyche yourselves up as if you're gonna come and cut me down. Now, begin!”

*What the hell!!!*

A silent protest that probably would have sounded like that if it had been put into words enveloped the entire area (or so it felt). Even the honest and obedient Selphie thought that the examinees would not be satisfied with Rain's orders.

Selphie had long since realized that she could feel surges of power rolling off of people who had more than a certain level of strength. She thought that Rain was intending on seeing which examinees had that kind of power, but——

*Is that really... okay?*

*I mean, I'm happy with this because it's not scary.*

“Hey, go home if you don't feel like doing it. Otherwise, hurry it up already!”

Despite being the most unwilling out of everyone present, Rain yelled out, “got a problem?!” at the crowd of examinees and glared begrudgingly at his two aides who seemed like they wanted to protest his methods.

The giant and tough examinee with the battle axe sullenly took a step forward, alone, but ultimately rethought his decision and returned to where he had originally been.

Other small voices of discontent leaked out and spread like a ripple before tapering off. All of the other examinees looked at each other as if they were saying, ‘this is stupid, but I guess we'll play along,’ and readied their weapons once more.

“Alright, let's hurry up and begin, quickly now. Psyche yourselves up as if you're gonna

cut me down in a moment, mkay? Pretend that you won't have a future! I'll kill you if you don't get to me first... think something along the lines of that."

The tension in the air tightened up a little as he spoke with a hint of something sharp in his words. The venue grounds fell silent at once. Selphie had already psyched herself up long ago. Pressing her lips into a thin line, she fired herself up as much as she could and narrowed her large eyes.

*This person is an enemy, an enemy I have to beat!*





At that moment, all of the commotion faded from her ears.

Her senses sharpened. She forgot about the other examinees clamoring around her, and she even completely forgot about her extraordinary circumstances (that she was homeless). She made sure that she wasn't grabbing onto the hilt of her sword too hard so that she could swing it at any time, and she did not let her gaze fall away from her opponent for even a moment. Subconsciously, she drew back her left leg a little. Now, she could leap out at any given moment.

Perhaps something that was unseen to the eyes had been conveyed to the enemy——in other words, to Rain at the time.

Rain, who had been looking over at the examinees with a relaxed bearing, turned his head as if someone had called out to him and met Selphie's gaze.

*Oh?* he seemed to say with his eyes and the corners of his lips curled upward.

His smile was even more brazen and bold than what the rumors said.

And then, there was a sudden counterattack.

And it was ever a spirited one!

*Bam!!*

She felt a sudden gust of wind pressure. Of course, there hadn't actually been any wind. She had, however, certainly felt pressure exploding out from Rain like a windstorm.

She suddenly felt sweat dripping down her face... For some reason, Rain looked like a giant towering over his surroundings to her.

Her overwhelmingly strong opponent astutely caught her gaze. She couldn't look away.

His black eyes were so clear that they were scary, and it felt like they were peering through the depths of her very being. Currently, his eyes occupied her entire field of

vision.

The man who had long since finished climbing the path that normal humans could only take little by little stared directly at Selphie. It was then that Selphie realized that her opponent was someone who had exceeded the realm of humanity.

Her opponent was in all likelihood not being serious, and half of the reason he had mixed in a bit of his 'power' into his fighting spirit was likely just for fun. After all, he hadn't even touched his magic sword.

*"Well, I'm gonna come at you guys now... Are you ready?"*

He was probably only showing them how he boosted his own awareness right before a battle.

It was as if he wasn't serious at all. It was something similar to how people sometimes pretended to take the puppy they were playing with seriously. Selphie could at least understand that much.

But even still——

At that time, Selphie had most certainly touched upon a fragment of Rain's strength.

Her legs became unsteady, and she began to back up little by little before she knew it. Her opponent's fighting spirit had blown away all of her willpower, and had even broken through any remaining stubbornness she had held. The tip of her sword was wavering... as if it was projecting its master's discomposure with every tremor. Her knees trembled under the weight of the overwhelming invisible power. The sound of feet scraping echoed from various places throughout the venue. It seemed that several other people had also felt Rain's power. The people whose posture had crumbled out of fear.

*I can't do this anymore, I'm gonna fall to the floor!*

When Selphie had let out a shriek because she could not endure the pressure any longer, Rain abruptly broke off his gaze.

The overwhelming pressure that had weighed upon her entire body gently faded away.

Then, as if it had all been no big deal, Rain ordered,

“alright, that’s enough. That’s the end of the exam.”

Crestfallen, Selphie fell to her knees.

She could not help but do so.

While most of the examinees in the venue were sighing as if their spirits had left them, Selphie was breathing raggedly. She thought that there were a few other people who were just as exhausted as she was, but she did not even have the energy to check.

She had really thought that she was about to be killed.

“Ah~, well, I’m gonna announce the names of those who passed now. First, Selphie.”

“Fuehh!?”

“No... don’t “fuehh” me, I really mean that you passed. Oh, and I can see your panties again, you know?”

*Eh!?*

She sprang up like she had been kicked.

“I’m kidding. Have you returned to your senses?”

Rain turned away from Selphie and continued to call out the names of those who passed, saying, “ah~, and you there in the second line, second from the front, and——”. Most of them were drenched in sweat and laying exhausted on the floor like Selphie.

The jubilation began to kick in little by little.

Forgetting about how nervous she had been up until now, Selphie was honestly moved by the fact that her dream to become a knight would come true. She would start out as a squire, but she was definitely a step closer to her goal than she had been before. She felt that the path leading to her dream had opened up to her all at once.

However, the only thing that bothered her was the question of whether or not it was really all right for someone like her to pass. After all, she had not been able to stand up against Rain at all.

“——And, that’s it. Unfortunately, the rest of you are disqualified.”

Rain finished calling out the names of the examinees who passed.

Many examinees who had been listening with bated breath wailed silently. Most of them were probably dissatisfied with how the exam had been conducted.

*“Hey, you can’t just do that!”*

And, of course, a voice of dissent.

The owner of the outcry, the large man with a battle axe who had almost stepped forward to complain previously, left his line and lumbered up to the front.

He then began to glare at Rain from up close.

The mountain of muscle, who stood a full head taller than the longsword-wielding Rain and was unquestionably wider, insisted on making his existence known.

*He kinda smells like sweat.*

She felt bad about it, but that was Selphie’s impression of him.

Rain jabbed a finger at the large man with a side-eye that anyone could tell was filled with irritation and asked,

“what’s with this?”

He was asking Leni, who was standing next to him.

The large man opened his eyes wide. *He’s mad, he’s super mad.*

Flustered, Leni dropped his eyes down upon a piece of paper in his hand that was likely a register of the examinee’s names. Selphie had reacted before either of them... but, because her legs were still trembling, she could only move to the front while tottering like an old woman.



“Excuse me! There’s something I want to ask you, Lord General!”

“What is it? You passed, so what are you so dissatisfied about? Did you want to fail instead?”

He was still glaring out of the side of his eye like he would brush aside any nuisances at any moment.

“Of course not! I’m not dissatisfied about anything. It’s just...”

“It’s just what?”

“...I couldn’t measure up to you at all, Lord General. So how did I pass?”

“Look here, you.”

Rain looked like he was looking at a pitifully feeble creature. He continued,

“first things first, quit with the “Lord General” thing.”

After giving his warning, he added on,

“what did you think after facing me?”

“Eh? After facing you, Lor——no, General? Well that’s...”

Selphie glanced back and forth between Senoa and the others, who were listening in on the discussion, and the flabbergasted man who had been rendered unable to protest because he could not follow the flow of conversation, and continued in an extremely high-pitched voice,

“I think that you have a very masculine face and that you’re very handsome, General, but I like older brother types who give off a kinder vibe, so——ack!”

*Wham!*

Rain hit her on the head with his scabbard (with the magic sword still in it).

Giant stars danced before her eyes. Selphie now understood how Senoa had felt earlier. She felt like her head would split in two as she sank down to her knees like a

nun in prayer. What ever had Rain meant when he called himself a “man who’s sweet to girls before all else”? That wasn’t the case at all!

“...That... really hurts,”

Selphie managed to squeeze out.

“Of course it does! Who the hell asked you about the types of guys you like?! And what was with that shameless part about kind older brothers?! Besides, I don’t prefer little kids like you either!”

“But I’m already seventeen,”

she somehow managed to say. She couldn’t say any more because her head was still throbbing.

“Seventeen is still young enough to be kid from my point of view. And that’s not it! I was talking about our invisible fight from earlier. I was asking about your thoughts on facing me during that!”

“Oh, if that’s the case——”

Recovering from the hit, she continued,

“I thought you were amazing! I knew you were strong, but I’d never guess you had that much ‘power’! General, you’re definitely stronger than you say you are!”

“...Pft!”

Rain’s mood visibly recovered.

After taking a moment to brush back his hair, he pointed at the brawny muscle man who had been left out of the conversation and unable to continue his protest.

“In a nutshell, that’s the reason. You’re weak, but you’re still able to read how strong your opponent is. But this sweaty dude here couldn’t do that at all. That’s why you passed and he failed. Got it?”

*...Now that you spell it out like that, I think I do.*

It couldn't be argued that being able to feel Rain's fighting spirit was worth points in and of itself.

"...I think I understand."

"Well there's no way in hell that I do!"

the man clamored in protest, recovering from his daze after watching Selphie nod repeatedly.

Leni finally looked up from his piece of paper and said,

"oh, General, I found it! This guy's name is..."

"Who cares what his name is?!"

Rain curtly rejected his aide's hard work.

Turning to the protesting man, he twisted his mouth into a frown and continued,

"I see that you're pretty dissatisfied with how I run my exam."

"Of fuckin' course I am! Who the hell'd be okay with the damn nonsensical way you ran it, huh?"

the large man angrily barked back while raising his thick eyebrows. A few other examinees who remained in the venue surrounded them from a distance and secretly nodded amongst themselves. He continued,

"for starters, I'm obviously stronger than that brat no matter how you look at it!"

The large man pointed his battle axe at Selphie with a whoosh and threw out his chest. His pectorals bulged atrociously through his vest. It looked like his buttons would explode off at any moment.

"Eek!"

Selphie squealed and stepped back out of disgust, rather than fear.

"Geh... gross. You really can find guys like this almost anywhere."

Rain also frowned and created some distance between himself and the large man. Then, he continued,

“guys who’ve made it through the world on brute strength alone and impulsively think that brute strength will carry them through anything just because it’s worked for them so far. It can’t be avoided that they don’t realize how weak they actually are.”

“Wha, what’d you say?!”

Rain let the large man’s anger pass right over him and brazenly smiled.

“I’ll force you to understand. I’m gonna sock you now, so try blocking it. If you can avoid it or even hit back, I’ll make you a knight or a general or whatever. I’m sure you won’t have any objections!”

“What!... Seriously?!”

“Of course. Besides, do you really think I’d still be a general if I couldn’t even deal with punks like you?! Just try and fight back as hard as you please.”

The muscle man, who was clearly pouting about being called a punk, slowly began to grin widely as he digested Rain’s proposition. He stroked at his stubble and laughed vulgarly. It was clear that in his mind, he was already vividly imaging himself basking in glory after having defeated Rain and succeeding him as high general.

Even Selphie might have imagined Rain getting beaten up if this exchange had happened half an hour ago, but her current opinion differed.

*This guy just doesn’t get it.*

“You’re gonna regret it. Gahaha!”

the large man laughed heartedly, as if he wanted to blow away the ceiling with his laughter, as he returned the battle axe to his waist. The reason he spoke so freely was because he did not doubt that he would be victorious.

Leni looked at him as if he was a cow that was about to be turned into beef, and Senoa looked like she didn’t know whether she should stop him or not.

Rain, who was at the center of this all, laughed along with the large man.

“Hahaha!”

He laughed in harmony with the man for a while and then suddenly stopped midway. Then, he said,

“well, are you ready?”

“Yeah, I’m good whenever you are. Gimme your worst!”

And a moment after he said that——

“Bweh!?”

The man flew into the air while bleeding heavily from the nose and his large body slammed into the right-hand wall. He really must have flown at least ten meters.

It should have been impossible considering his weight, but Selphie couldn’t help but accept it as real because it had happened right in front of her.

Even Selphie, who had been watching from the very beginning, had not grasped Rain’s actions. Just like what had happened at the castle gates, there had simply been a gentle breeze that had slightly lifted up her bangs.

Then, she had seen a black afterimage for a moment before it lost its shape and disappeared.

That was it.

Before she could even think, ‘whoa,’ the large man was already convulsing on the floor. He could not move at all. Or rather, considering how far he was thrown, he probably wouldn’t wake up for a while.

“...He was so weak that he wasn’t really even worth doing this for. In any case, he failed,”

Rain said cheerfully as he lowered his fist. It was thanks to this action that Selphie finally realized, “oh, I see, he punched him.” Rain had been so fast before that Selphie had no idea what he had done.

“——And?”



Rain swiftly looked over at the ex-examinees who had been spectating. He continued, “does anyone else have any complaints? I’ll listen to any objections you might have.”

He received a quick response. Everyone shook their heads in tandem. Even the people who had passed.

“It’s all good as long as you understand. Well then, the exam has safely concluded,”

Rain wrapped up in an arrogant manner.

Then, a lovely soprano sounded through the air.

“Rain!”

The gleeful shout of an extremely happy girl echoed throughout the silent venue grounds.

*Eh?*

The voice had come from... A lone girl had appeared from a small exit along the right-hand wall instead of the entrance behind Selphie with an expression that seemed to say, ‘I found you.’

*How... beautiful...*

Even the heartfelt joy that Selphie had felt at passing the exam temporarily vanished.

The girl had such a well-proportioned appearance that Selphie found herself at a loss for a moment. Her long, straight blonde hair, which lacked even the slightest hint of dullness, reached down her back and her azure eyes, which was characteristic of her status among the nobility, were so large and lovely that Selphie was almost jealous.

Along with her kindly shaped eyebrows, the distinct shape of the bridge of her nose, and her porcelain-white skin, Selphie couldn’t help but think that this girl was favored by god.

Selphie had been called “cute” countless times in the past, but she felt like the dull moon before the bright sun when she compared herself to this girl.

People could find fault with any beauty if they tried hard enough, no matter how lovely the beauty was, but they would have to give up on finding any faults with this girl. She was the embodiment of perfection.

*That girl is so pretty...* Selphie was captivated. She thought that it would have been bad if she was a boy. She would have fallen in love at first sight.

The girl's face enthusiastically brightened up after seeing Rain and she did not seem to have even noticed the smelly muscular man sprawled out at her feet.

Most likely, all of the other spectators, including Selphie, had not even entered her field of vision. She was simply looking at Rain, and only Rain, with that much earnest.

Immediately, the girl trotted her way over to Rain. She looked so very, very happy as she did.

The mysterious girl's identity was revealed soon afterward.

Senoa and Leni saluted her reverently, and Rain called out to her with great familiarity, as if he had been calling out to a close friend.

"Hey Princess."

*Ehh— — — — —!?*

Unrest spread through the crowd of spectators like ripples across water's surface.

There was only one person who could be called "Princess" in all of Sunkwoll. That person was Her Royal Highness Princess Shelfa, who was to be the next queen. There was a coronation that was planned to take place soon, and once the ceremony was over, she would be queen in both name and reality. No, she was basically the queen already.

Generally speaking, the Sunkwoll throne was inherited from parent to child.

While there were several nobles who could be considered royalty, Shelfa was to be the next queen according to this basic principle.

*Ehhh— — —?!!*

Still extremely flustered, all of the other examinees bent down on one knee. Technically speaking, the Princess was just another noble and wasn't even their liege, but it was still considered proper etiquette to kneel before royalty.

To explain, Selphie was a squire under Rain's command and her only liege lord was Rain, not Princess Shelfa.

This arrangement would not change even after Shelfa ascended the throne. Other countries aside, Sunkwoll knights only served their respective feudal lord, so Selphie's only true ruler was Rain. As an extreme example of this principle, should Rain ever exclaim, "I'll overthrow Shelfa and become the king myself, gahaha!" Selphie and the other knights would have no choice but to aid his plans.

This was the case from Selphie's position even if Rain was also a knight in Shelfa's service. Just because Rain was Shelfa's retainer, it did not mean that Selphie was as well.

It was a little complicated, but it could be said that the king of Sunkwoll was simply the greatest feudal lord in the kingdom.

That being said, the aforementioned schema was simply the official doctrine, and the next queen was still the next queen. It was only natural to pay her due respect.

Selphie wanted to bow so low that her head hit the floorboards, never mind just bending a knee. After all, she had been a homeless commoner just mere minutes ago.

And thus, Selphie tried to bend down on one knee like everyone else——. However, her legs had not completely recovered yet and were still wobbly, causing her to lose her balance like a fool and classically fall over. Naturally, her skirt flipped over spectacularly.

Rain immediately looked over and rudely commented, "this is getting old."

Then, he added,

"I've been watching you for a while now, but... do you have some kind of fetish where

you feel a pressing need to show off your underwear at periodic intervals?"

Selphie knew that her face was probably bright red by now.

"Ab, absolutely not! Besides, do people like that even exist?!"

"They do,"

Rain replied without missing a beat.

*No, well, if you say so.*

Discouraged, Selphie knelt again with an awkward look on her face. She lowered her head so that the princess would not see her blushing. Still, she secretly peeked up to look... She had never laid eyes upon royalty before, so she could not help but be curious.

The princess lifted a slight hand up to her lips and opened her eyes wider, as if she was saying, "oh my." It seemed that she truly had not noticed Selphie and the others until now.

"Um... Am I interrupting something, Rain?"

Shelfa gently placed a hand on Rain's back. She was rather timid for a princess.

"Not at all, it's already over. We held the Official Knight Recruitment Exam today."

"Is that so? And... who is the person on the ground over there?"

Again, the princess, who was fretfully staring at the fallen man, did not seem to have realized he was there until just now.

Blood was pooling on the ground from the man's nose as his large face planted a kiss on the floor... It was truly a wretched scene.

"Oh~, him?"

Rain sighed as if nothing had happened and continued,

"he was a bit oversensitive, despite what his body frame may suggest. He got a

nosebleed and fainted because he was too nervous during the exam. Man, it didn't suit him at all... It's a pity, but he was disqualified. Truly unfortunate. Well, he did have plenty of enthusiasm, to say the least."

*Th, the nerve of this guy!*

Multiple reproachful glares converged on Rain, but he only continued to act as nonchalant as ever.

"And what about you, Princess; did you have some business here?"

"No, I simply wanted to speak with you, Rain."

She smiled brightly.

Her smile was so beautiful that Selphie found herself deeply moved again. *She's so pretty... but she's really obvious about her favoritism. I'm kinda jealous.*

"Oh, but now that I think about it,"

the princess recalled,

"Lord Ralphus was looking for you, Rain."

*Why is she only referring to Lord Ralphus as "Lord"?*

Selphie wondered right off the bat. She knew that Ralphus was Rain's fellow high general. Actually, there wasn't anyone who *didn't* know that Ralphus was Rain's fellow high general. Ralphus had deep ties with royalty and was one of the greater nobles.

Even still, the reason that the princess addressed Ralphus politely was likely due to her personality, so why didn't she extend the same treatment to General Rain?

From the aforementioned point, one would generally reach the conclusion that 'there's something suspicious about those two,' but Selphie, who did not have any ill will toward them, simply thought, 'I'm glad that I'll be serving under someone who gets along so well with his liege~,' and was relieved. She was sure that she would be able to serve under Rain as a proper knight (though she was still a squire) for many years to come since that was the case.

At any rate, that was what she had thought at the time.

Later, she would be brought to tears after recalling her naïve prediction.

Anyhow, Rain replied to the princess,

“he’s calling for me? Ohoo...”

Satisfied, he nodded to himself. Then, he called out to his two aides and said, “hey, I’ll leave the rest to you,” and made to leave with the princess. Senoa, who looked angry for some reason, and Leni, who looked a little jealous, gave them a light bow.

On the other hand, Selphie, who was still sitting on the ground, recalled her pressing situation.

She called out to the retreating black figure,

“Um, General!”

“What’s up?”

Selphie blushed again as the princess and her retainer turned around. After thinking things through, she realized that what she was about to ask wasn’t the sort of thing she should be asking the general, who was technically her liege lord.

“Umm~...”

“What is it; hurry up and spit it out.”

“Of course. Err... is it possible for me to enter the lodgings today?”

“...Are you seriously asking me that?”

As expected, he told her off.

“You’re a pretty cheeky one, you know that?”

He even delivered the final blow.



“I, I’m sorry!”

“Well you see, there’s a bit of a complicated procedure that has to take place before you can stay at the lodgings, and it usually takes at least five days.”

Leni, ever the kind older-brother type, informed her from the side. She should have asked him instead to begin with.

“Oh, is that so?”

Selphie nodded.

Meanwhile, Selphie wanted to cry. She was embarrassed after having drawn attention to herself, and she didn’t know anywhere she could stay for five days. A few copper was all that she had on her... It would only net her maybe one meal or so.

By the time she had resolved herself to sleeping under a bridge, Rain brusquely said,

“it’s fine.”

“Eh?”

“You can stay at lodgings starting today. I’ll make a special exception for you.”

*Really?!*

Before Selphie could express her joy, however, Senoa flared up and exclaimed,

“General! You can’t simply say things like that! It sets a bad example for the others!”

“This is why I don’t like people who were pampered growing up,”

Rain grumbled with his mouth twisting into a frown. He continued,

“if anyone has a problem with it, they can just shut up and leave my service, I won’t stop them. And besides,”

his tone became intentionally cockier,

“in my unit, I am the law!”

“But——”

“Enough!... Leni, deal with all the paperwork so she can stay at the lodgings.”

“Yes, yes, please leave it to me,”

Leni nodded with a smile.

Selphie was relieved from the bottom of her heart. While she could nibble on bread crusts for food if it came to the worst, there was nothing she could do about not having a place to sleep. She was truly grateful.

“Well, make sure to do it properly,”

Rain said as he pat the reassured Selphie on the shoulder. Then, he whispered to her so that the others couldn't hear,

“come to my room once you're done putting away your things.”

*Eh?* Selphie immediately looked up at Rain, but he had already urged the princess forward and was walking away as if nothing had happened.

*Come to his room later... I wonder why.*

Selphie's face had already become as red as an overripe apple.

*There, there's no way... right?*

*He didn't mean it like that, right...?*

# CHAPTER 2

## PRINCESS ASSASSINATION

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### PART 1

Soon after they had stepped out into the sunlight and began walking through the deserted area behind the royal palace, Rain stopped in his tracks and called out to no one in particular.

“Good work.”

“Eh?”

Shelfa, who had sneak~ily been trying to entwine her arm around Rain’s, drew back in a panic. She hadn’t even realized that he had been looking at them.

He seemed to have silently materialized from beneath the shadows of a grove of trees that had been planted at evenly spaced intervals around the ramparts.

He swept aside his black mantle with sharp movements and gave an elegant bow.

Shelfa remembered him. He was the man who had waited upon Rain by his side like a shadow during the previous battle. He always looked like he was in a bad mood, and he had deep creases folded between his brows as if something was greatly to his distaste even now. He would have been a charming young man if only he smiled a little, but his lack of friendliness and his sour looks detracted from him greatly (or so Shelfa thought).

*If I recall correctly, I think his name was Gunther Valoa...* Shelfa, who had a good memory, recalled even the man’s last name correctly.

Nevertheless, he always appeared unexpectedly like a phantom.

“Any changes?”

Unlike Shelfa, who was still at a loss from Gunther’s unanticipated appearance, Rain shot him a question as if he had been waiting for him.

“There are none.”

Soon after he replied, Gunther vaguely seemed like he had more to say.

“Hmm?”

“I felt a suspicious presence more than once. I am certain that there is a definite possibility that we have already been infiltrated.”

“I see. Ralphus was in charge of security this month, and he’s not one to cut corners either. The other side is probably good at what they do. And considering that they’re wary enough not to get tripped up by you, there’s probably someone big backing them.”

“Yes. I speculated the same...”

Rain took a moment to contemplate and nodded soon afterward.

“Understood. I’ll stick with her for the time being. I’d like you to devote yourself to the investigation.”

“Sir!”

According to Shelfa’s memories, Gunther was a tremendously unsociable person, but he was always terribly obedient to Rain. Without asking even a single question, Gunther respectfully bowed yet again.

“Um...”

Shelfa interposed, unable to endure it any longer. She asked,

“Rain, what are you talking about?”

“Oh, my bad. That probably sounded like gibberish to you, Little one.”

Shelfa replied, “yes,” and was suddenly hit by realization.

Had Rain forgotten that Gunther was still here? It was Rain who had told her that they should be careful about how they talked in front of other people.

“Nah, he’s good.”

Rain guessed Shelfa’s thoughts by the look on her face and pat her head with a broad smile. He continued,

“he’s the exception among exceptions. He’s well aware of the situation. That, and we have an old promise between us that we’d keep no secrets from each other.”

When Rain said that, the tips of Gunther’s lips curled ever so slightly into a faint smile that would have been easily overlooked if you weren’t watching carefully enough. It had disappeared after a very brief moment, but, for the first time ever, Shelfa managed to see the young man smile.

Something hurt in her heart at that moment. She was somewhat jealous of him, even though she knew that she was being foolish. In the past, Shelfa had nothing to do with this sort of jealousy because she had completely given up on connecting with other people, but this was no longer the case now that she had met Rain. From time to time, Shelfa was bewildered by her newfound emotions.

“...Oh!”

Rain and Gunther were staring at her before she knew it.

“Relax,”

Rain messed up Shelfa’s hair,

“I don’t plan on falling in love with another man.”

“Oh, umm...!”

Rain smiled brilliantly as Shelfa panicked. He continued,

“but you really do tend to express everything you’re feeling. Hold it back a little. A ruler is someone who has to smile even in the face of someone creepy and disgusting from time to time.”

“Yes... I’ll keep it in mind.”

Even as she apologized, Shelfa couldn’t help but swell up with happiness as Rain

continued to stroke her hair. The girl who had thought herself hard to please had long since disappeared into the past.

When the two of them had walked away, Shelfa looked back and saw that Gunther still remained where he was with his head bowed low in their direction.

She did not know what had happened between the two, but she was certain that Gunther respected Rain deeply.

Gunther was a 'good person'.

This was the conclusion that Shelfa had decided upon in her heart. For Shelfa, who had always lived an insular life inside the castle, the world was divided into 'good people', 'bad people', and 'people I don't know'.

Actually, there was also a level called 'people I love' a step above 'good people' after skipping 'people I like' (because she didn't have any), and according to Shelfa's standards, the position was already at full capacity and she did not plan to have any more or any fewer people on that level.

Incidentally, there was only one person in that position.

"So, about Gunther before."

"Yes?"

"He's actually been following you since yesterday."

"...Eh?"

She almost stopped in her tracks for a moment.

"But I haven't seen him even once until now."

"Well... he doesn't really stand out. I also told him not to trouble you if possible."

"I see. And, um...?"

"Oh, the reason, right?"



When Shelfa nodded in response, Rain shrugged and said,

“I’m actually about to go explain that to Ralphus too. I don’t really wanna explain myself twice, so can you wait just a little?”

“...Yes, if you say so, Rain,”

Shelfa quickly consented.

*In any case, it was probably something necessary for my sake,*

Shelfa determined silently without even the slightest intent of doubting Rain. No matter what was about to happen, Rain would never do something bad to her. This is what Shelfa believed.

Besides, she didn’t exactly have the time to freely think about it either.

Rain suddenly stopped walking once they had gotten close to something that could be called the back entrance to the royal palace.

At first, Shelfa thought that he had stopped because he was being cautious now that she had finally managed to twist her arm around his, but he had stopped for different reason altogether.

“I see, a suspicious presence, huh. That Gunther, he told me something good.”

*A presence?*

Shelfa hurriedly pulled her arm back, looked behind her, and turned back around to face forward.

There was no one there.

The ramparts were to her left and the palace was to her right. While the palace windows that she could see were covered by curtains, no one had been peeking through them. And of course, no one had been in the shadow of the tree groves like Gunther had been either.

But, if Rain said “I feel a presence,” then there was surely someone here.

When Shelfa naturally tried to snuggle up closer to Rain, he moved.

That being said, what Shelfa actually saw was Rain's afterimage.

He dropped down, drew his magic sword, and swung upward. His blurry black shadow converged into him a moment later, as if it was saying, "there!" As always, Rain moved with a reaction speed that had surpassed humanity. He had already finished attacking by the time that Shelfa had blinked.

His magic sword drew an arc and left behind a distinctly blue trail in the air.

*Crack*

Shelfa heard something breaking apart.

A part of the ramparts far above her had been destroyed and blasted stone fragments into the air. The wall was made of sturdy rock, but it had been no match for the Siren's Blade's "invisible slash".

Rain picked Shelfa up and evacuated in order to dodge the falling fragments. Rather than being surprised by his sudden attack, Shelfa was so happy that she gave a small yelp of joy at being held.

She realized that she was being considerably carefree, but she always felt a deep sense of security with Rain that made her not want to worry about anything.

"Tch! They reacted, but..."

Rain clicked his tongue and looked up at the fragments falling heavily on the path. He continued,

"they're good at running away, I'll give them that. I can still catch up to them, but..."

he looked at Shelfa, who was still in his arms,

"——yeah, I shouldn't. It's not like I can just leave you here alone."

*I'd be happy to wait for you here.*

Just as Shelfa was about to put her thoughts into words, the piercing sound of a whistle

echoed through the air. The soldier who had been keeping watch from a nearby bastion had realized that something was awry.

“Oh~, Ralphus’ men are as diligent as I expected them to be. They sure are super-duper quick to get up when something’s up,”

he muttered as he broke out into a run with Shelfa still in his arms.

He was heading toward the entrance in front of them.

“Um, wouldn’t it be better to stay and explain what happened to the guards?”

“It’s fine. It’d be a waste of time if things go wry while we explain, and I don’t want to get blamed for breaking the ramparts either.”

Shelfa thought that it was Rain’s fault that the ramparts broke no matter how you looked at it, but, naturally, she didn’t blame him. She simply nodded in honest agreement.

Or rather, she was more displeased on the point that, ‘I finally got him to hold me, but he’ll put me down once we’re inside of the castle...’

Ralphus Juliard Sunkwoll.

Even if there were a few people in Sunkwoll who didn’t know of Rain, there was no one who didn’t know of Ralphus.

After all, he hailed from an outstandingly good lineage.

One of Sunkwoll’s, whose history extended over a thousand and a few hundred years, five founders (all of which who were not human according to the rumors) was Ralphus’ direct ancestor.

These five founders were the origin of Sunkwoll’s noble lines, and their direct

descendants in particular gathered much respect.

Naturally, Ralphus, who was treated as semi-royalty, was treated completely differently in court than Rain, who was an ex-mercenary with neither lineage nor court rank to his name.

Hypothetically speaking, if the royal bloodline died out for whatever reason, it was entirely possible that Ralphus would inherit the throne.

Furthermore, Ralphus was the only exception to the masses' perception of 'useless nobles who only know how to oppress others.' He received overwhelming support from the people. This was because he did not excessively favor his peers of the nobility and because he had a great personality in general.

He was also unquestioningly trusted by his men. The fact that Ralphus' unit had held together until the very end during the previous battle while the other high generals' units quickly fell apart proved how much Ralphus' men idolized him.

And, when Rain and Shelfa barged into this all-important character's room without even knocking, he stood up and looked toward the princess in surprise.

He appeared to have had been talking to one of his men and quickly issued him some orders.

"I'll be there myself in a little while. At any rate, make sure to strengthen our security. Also, close the castle gates for the time being and don't let anyone out."

After responding with a "yessir!" and a salute, the knight bowed toward Rain and Shelfa and hurried out.

Once his subordinate had closed the door, Ralphus left the desk he used for governmental affairs and reverently knelt before the princess.

"Good morning, Your Royal Highness. Thank you for taking the trouble of coming all the way here today."

"Yeah. Well, don't mind it too much —the opportunity just happened to come up. But it's almost lunchtime, you know?"

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

Ralphus smiled wryly as he stood up. He was as radiantly beautiful as always, but little hints of fatigue showed through in his expression.

“In any case, I received a report just now... someone destroyed a part of the ramparts. I have no idea why they did that, though.”

“Lo, such destruction!”

Rain opened his eyes wide and continued,

“what a crafty jerk. I see, the ramparts... Unforgivable. You can never be wary enough in this world.”

He crossed his arms and shook his head in a show of pity. Amused by the sincerely serious look on his face, Shelfa instinctively brought a hand up to her lips. She couldn’t help but laugh no matter how hard she tried.

Evidently, this tipped Ralphus off.

Ralphus looked at Shelfa with suspicion and moved his gaze to Rain, who was strangely absorbed by the completely ordinary still-life painting on the wall. He came to a conclusion soon enough.

“...Are you the culprit?”

“Whoa!”

Rain began, taken aback a little,

“what brought this on all of a sudden?”

“I, I’m so sorry, Rain.”

Shelfa apologized on reflex, confirming Ralphus’ suspicions.

“...It really was you. Rain, you’re not going to tell me that you intentionally destroyed the ramparts for Her Highness’ amusement, are you?”

“Hey, just what do you think of me——”

After being rendered speechless for a moment, Rain continued,

“do you really think that I’d destroy the ramparts for something like that?! It was ‘them’; they really appeared.”

“What!? Did you see them?”

“No, just a black shadow. They reacted, but they got away.”

“That’s——”

Ralphus started just as he realized something, frowned, and cleared his throat. He continued,

“...we can talk about this later.”

“Why not now? Isn’t that why you were looking for me?”

Rain threw himself down on the sofa at the corner of the room without asking for permission first (and Shelfa sat down next to him soon afterward) and continued after taking a glance in Shelfa’s direction,

“I think it’s strange to keep it a secret from the person in question. I understand how you feel too, but isn’t it better to let her know? After all, it’s a ruler’s duty to decide.”

“However——”

Ralphus cut himself off mid-sentence with a small sigh and took a seat across from Rain. He instead continued,

“perhaps you’re right. Besides, I’ve only just been informed of this matter by Gunther this morning myself. I’d like to hear the details.”

“...What are you two talking about?”

Shelfa looked up at Rain.

She wondered if they were talking about something scary.

She was about to place a small white hand on Rain's arm, but gave up on the notion upon second thought. Ralphus was here with them.

Looking at Shelfa, who looked anxious, Rain said in a truly relaxed manner,

"in other words, you're being targeted by assassins, Princess."

Shelfa stopped breathing for a moment and stared back at Rain for a while. It took her a moment to properly digest what he had said.

The truth was obvious when she considered Rain's actions just earlier and his and Ralphus' conversation up until now, but Shelfa still could not accept it.

After all——

"...What good would it do to assassinate me?"

she asked in surprise before any other emotion.

She understood the gravity of the situation, of course, but she simply could not believe that she was important enough to assassinate. After all, that was how it had always been.

Her two retainers looked at one another until Ralphus rekindled the discussion.

"Your Royal Highness... I can generally fathom what you are thinking, but you are in a far more important position than you realize. It's not all that strange that there are impudent individuals who are after your life."

Rain gave Ralphus a side-eye as the latter took great pains to choose his words carefully and picked off with unreserved candor,

"simply put, defeating an enemy ruler is the most ideal method to make them self-destruct. Especially since you're the only successor to the throne right now, Princess."

"Hey, Rain!"

"I know. I get that I'm not mincing any words here. But the truth is the truth.

"But——" Rain's voice became ominously lower,



“I don’t like this; I don’t like this at all... As if I’d let something that messed up happen while I’m here.”

Bloodlust was unmistakably embedded in his words. Even Shelfa, who had grown up never knowing the battlefield, could feel and recognize it clearly.

The room fell into deathly silence.

Although, unlike Ralphus, Shelfa remained silent because she was deeply moved.



Ralphus adjusted his seat as if he was trying to dispel the dense bloodlust and finally asked,

“so, did you find out who’s responsible?”

“No. Gunther hasn’t figured it out that far yet. All I know is that the agent I planted in the assassin’s guild heard something about a “princess assassination”.... There’s no doubt that a commission was made, but even my agent doesn’t know who the client is.”

“Is the Zarmine after all?”

“...That’s probably the biggest possibility. But we won’t get anywhere until we know for sure.”

“I see... you’re right.”

Ralphus nodded with a troubled look and asked the important question,

“and what will you do?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m talking about security measures for Her Highness, naturally. It’s not as if we can simply allow things to go on as they have been.”

“Hm~m, I already talked to Gunther about it, and I think it should work out okay. But it’s always better to be safe than sorry in case something like today happens again.”

Then, Rain noticed how Shelfa was staring expectantly at him and scratched his cheek. He continued,

“well, let’s do this: I’ll stick close to her for the time being.”

Pressured into going with the flow, he declared,

“there’s no need to worry. As long as I’m at your side, we’ll have an easy victory even if a flock of dragons came at us all at once.”

Rain stuck out his chest after he finished his piece.

Incidentally, he had no basis for his claims.

But it still worked.

A happy smile broke out across Shelfa’s face. The distress that had colored her expressions before had completely vanished.

She clasped her hands in front of her chest and nodded repeatedly.

“Yes, I believe you. It’s very reassuring to hear.”

Even Ralphus, for whatever reason, took the opportunity to say,

“there’ll be nothing for me to worry about if you’ll be with Her Highness. That’s a load off of my chest.”

“...No, *you* should at least be a little worried, dangit.”

Rain had somewhat mixed feelings about his friend’s response.

*Why are you talking my bragging so seriously!?*

“I’ll be heading out to the castle gates. I still have some orders to give out.”

Ralphus stood up as soon as the words had left his mouth. He continued,

“there’s still a chance that the guards caught our shadow from before... not that I’m too hopeful about it.”

“Well yeah. They’re professional assassins. They’ll always be quick to run away if they fail.”

“Still, it’s not as if we can let that be an excuse not to investigate. In any case, I want to bring all of the facts about this case to light before the coronation ceremony. This is an important time, after all.”

Rain stared at Ralphus as the latter retrieved his sword from the wall.

“Hey. You look a little tired? Like, you look a little discolored, or something like that... Hey, are you eating and sleeping properly?”

“I’m eating just fine, but I’m probably a bit short on sleep. But I’m still alright. It’s not enough to hinder my ability to perform governmental affairs.”

Ralphus laughed in an invigorating manner, but he still seemed like he was pushing it somewhat.

Sunkwoll had lost a lot of talented personnel after the battle with Zarmine. Most of them had not died in battle, but rather had abandoned and fled the kingdom before the fighting started. Of all the things, even the person who had held the important office of chancellor had been among their number. He had tried to casually return to his position after the fighting was over, but Ralphus had counseled the princess to take definitive measures to dismiss the man. There were many cases similar to this.

Ironically, while these measures were necessary to purify the kingdom’s inner circle, they also served to increase Ralphus’ workload.

“No, you’re talking about your ability to perform governmental affairs, but you’re a knight, remember? You need to be able to fight at any given moment. I slept for ten whole hours last night in preparation for that moment, you know.”

“...I think you’ve slept too much.”

Ralphus smiled wryly yet again. It wasn’t as if he was angry, but rather that he was exasperated.

“In any case. Sleep early tonight. Don’t worry yourself too much. You’ll go bald.”

Rain stood up as he unduly scolded.

He nonchalantly pretended to head for the door——and then he attacked along the way.



Rain drew his sword and twisted his body in one flowing motion. There was no pause between the two actions, and he was as swift as the wind itself.

At the same time, Ralphus quickly moved his hand to his waist.

Even Shelfa, who was watching them from up close, could not follow what was going on and had her eyes wide open in surprise. The two magic swords clashed and spewed out a shower of sparks.

*Crackle crackle crackle*

The crimson light caught the bluish flash. The pure magical power imbued within the two swords repulsed each other and crackled nosily as they erupted in sparks.

“Ugh!”

Ralphus, who had just barely managed to stop Rain’s attack, grit his teeth as he was pushed back by the latter’s ridiculously potent strength. This was his first time catching Rain’s attack head-on, but... what speed and power!

“Not bad.”

Rain flashed a grin at Ralphus from the other side of their locked magic swords. While Ralphus was pushing back with his entire body, Rain barely looked like he was using his strength at all. Rain continued,

“as I’d expected, you’re a completely different story from the muscle-head I beat up earlier——but!”

As he scolded, Rain brought up his knee with frightening speed and rammed it against the pit of Ralphus’ stomach.

Ralphus avoided the blow by jumping back, but Rain simultaneously closed the distance attacked again from the side with his magic sword whistling through the air.

The knee had been a feint. Ralphus could not help but shudder at the sight of Rain's battle tactics, which, unlike knightly battle etiquette, had been forged and tempered through practical implementation. This man, Ralphus realized, could turn his whole body into a lethal weapon at will.

“——Hmph!”

Ralphus somehow managed to repel Rain's attack by scooping up his crimson magic sword from below.

Then, his opponent's magic sword's trail of light changed course and transformed into a meteor-like stab that was aimed diagonally at Ralphus' collar and downward. The tall, black-clad figure danced around the room and rained a barrage of attacks on Ralphus.

The princess had promptly fled to the wall and held a tightly clenched fist up near her mouth, but Ralphus did not have the leeway to pay her any heed.

Rain's magic sword moved as if it was always a step ahead of Ralphus' and kept up the initiative. The flashes of light that attacked from every possible direction were leading Ralphus along by the nose.

He was somehow managing to catch them for now, but Ralphus was forced to acknowledge the fact that he was completely on the defensive.

Rain was so fast that he did not have the room to launch a counterattack. Ralphus was tracking his opponent not with his eyes, but by feeling his presence.

And this truth set Ralphus' fighting spirit ablaze. Although he was mild-mannered, Ralphus also had his pride as a knight who had survived numerous battles. He flew into a rage at himself for being forced onto the defensive. It wasn't that he was angry at Rain. He was ashamed of his own faint-heartedness.

“Haaaaah!”

Ralphus boldly took advantage of a slight, barely-existent opening after Rain drew back his sword.

He threw his entire body into the tip of his scarlet sword as he thrust forward.

——*Oh no!*

Ralphus regretted it immediately. He had forgotten who his opponent was, forgotten where he was fighting, and had fought seriously. The crimson light sank into the center of the black shirt. Needless to say, it was a fatal wound.

But——

It had simply been Ralphus' delusion. The tall figure that he thought he had stabbed wavered like a heat haze, and multiple afterimages flowed to the right all at once.

In a moment, they overlapped with Rain's 'true body,' which had appeared to his right.

What Ralphus had pierced had only been a shadow that had arisen after Rain had dodged.

"As I'd thought, you're not your usual self. Your reactions got slower."

Before he knew it, Rain had sheathed his sword with a blank look on his face.

Rain nodded once after looking at Ralphus' hands and continued,

"putting that aside, it seems that you've already gotten used to using Justice."

"Yes, thanks to you..."

That was all that Ralphus managed to say. Their skirmish had only lasted a few dozen seconds, but his breathing was already ragged and all over the place. He could guess at what Rain's true intentions had been, but it was incredibly tiring nonetheless.

Still, Ralphus faithfully repeated a question that he had already asked numerous times. He could not help but ask every time the magic sword in his hand became the topic of the conversation.

"Incidentally, and I know that I'm being repetitive, is it really okay for me to accept this magic sword? This was originally your spoil of war."

The magic sword with a crimson aura writhing across its surface that Ralphus had

been swinging around to his heart's content just earlier was something that Rain had won after facing King Leygur of Zarmine in single combat.

Leygur had fled after their difficult fight and had left only the magic sword, Justice, behind. Thus, naturally, Rain had become its new owner. At the very least, that was what Ralphus thought.

"No, it's better for you to hold on to that,"

Rain replied as per usual. He continued,

"besides, a sword with the name, "Justice," doesn't suit me at all. I'm a man who stands at the antithesis of justice."

"But——"

"I'm saying it's fine! Just go ahead and take it already. If I kept it, I'd just sell it off as soon as possible anyway."

...That was certainly something that Rain might do. The princess, who had been looking worried this entire time, finally broke out into a smile at Rain's self-typical words.

Rain threw her an unassuming smile, but he returned to looking serious by the time he turned back to Ralphus. Ralphus understood that Rain was worried about him in his own way.

"Anyways, make sure you get some rest no matter what you have to do to make it happen. You have a bunch of guys like Nigel under you who're probably good at civil duties, don't you? Leave your work to them."

"I suppose it'd be best to do as you said.... And besides,"

Ralphus gently took a deep breath and regulated his breathing,

"I feel like you tired me out more than necessary... But it's not a bad feeling, of course. How about another round later?"

"Nope, I absolutely refuse."



Rain scowled in obvious distaste and continued,

“I’d rather not tire myself out like that. This was our first and final match.”

“You don’t look the least bit tired... but that’s too bad. I wanted to get you to train with me every day,”

Ralphus murmured from the bottom of his heart.

Rain hurried out of the room with the princess as he if knew that he wouldn’t be able to refuse if Ralphus seriously requested it of him.

Left with little other choice, Ralphus followed them out. In any event, he had to go to the castle gates for now.

“Still, this was our first time crossing blades, but you were terrifyingly fast. Your technique was something to behold too, but... is your speed something that you inherited from the dragon?”

Ralphus tried asking as they walked down the hallway together.

Those who succeeded in defeating a dragon, the strongest species on the continent, in single combat would gain the dragon’s ‘power’... No one knew who first spread the story, but that was what the legends had said since ancient times. In any case, while it seemed like a type of curse, there had been no ‘Dragon Slayers’ who could put those legends to test.

Even if those ‘huge benefits’ really did exist, dragons were not that easy to slay. It would be a near-impossible feat even for an army of sturdy knights, and something akin to a pipe dream to achieve alone. Thus, the legends had remained only as legends.

Dragon Slayers were heroes who only existed in the songs of bards. ——That was what everyone, including Ralphus, believed.

Recently, however, by curious chance it was made known that Rain was one such Dragon Slayer.

Ralphus had always thought that Rain looked too young to be twenty-five, but now he realized that there was a good reason for it. If Rain had inherited a dragon’s immortality, then it was only natural that he didn’t age.

In any case, since Rain had obtained the power of immortality, Ralphus thought that Rain's explosive speed was also one of the perks of being a Dragon Slayer.

However, Rain replied in an extremely bad mood,

"don't be stupid. That's way too good to be true. The only things I inherited from the dragon are its immortality, physical strength, magical power, and some special abilities."

...Ralphus thought that those boons were more than enough to be called sufficient.

To begin with, he felt that gaining a dragon's physical strength was far more useful than having explosive speed.

When he pointed that out, Rain explained,

"...well, I guess it certainly is useful to an extent. But having draconian strength is actually more of a hindrance when you're living life as a human. That's why I keep it sealed away on purpose. I can be ridiculously strong when I need to be, but those chances rarely ever come."

"Then, is your speed the result of continuous effort?... It must be, since steady training is the best way to get faster."

"Hey, don't just go and decide that on your own. Do you really think that I, of all people, would undergo something as tedious as "steady training"? The reason behind my strength and speed is——"

Rain puffed out his chest,

"that I am a genius!"

It wasn't a reason at all.

He was likely just posing. It was impossible to grow strong on talent alone without putting in any effort.

Just then, the princess let out a small giggle and placed a hand up to her lips. It looked like she knew some sort of secret. Ralphus put two and two together and came to an understanding.

“I see... Then I’ll just leave it at that.”

“...Hey, what’s with you taking the Princess’ giggling on higher consideration than my words, huh?”

Rain’s mood considerably worsened.

“Oh... I’m sorry, Rain.”

“Don’t be. I wasn’t blaming you, Princess. It’s just that I’m not liking how this played out, or something——”

As Rain continued to grumble, Ralphus laughed and said,

“I wasn’t doubting the fact that you’re a genius. There’s nothing for you to complain about. I simply believe that there are some walls that you cannot surpass even with effort and training.”

“That doesn’t apply to me.”

Brushing Rain’s insistence aside, Ralphus stopped at the landing that lead downstairs.

“All right, I get it.... At any rate, I’m going to the castle gales, so I’ll entrust Her Highness to you. We can’t really have her go outside too often before the coronation ceremony, too.”

“Oh, her debut, right?”

“Eh?... What are you talking about?”

Shelfa reached out to grab on to Rain’s sleeve, but put her hand down before midway through. Ralphus found it a very pleasant scene.

*Her Highness probably means to hide her feelings. I suppose the third wheel should be considerate and hurry up and make himself scarce.*

“I’ll be making my leave here... Your Highness, please have Rain explain the rest to you. Well then.”

When Rain asked him if he wanted to have lunch together, Ralphus declined with a

wave of his hand and climbed down the stairs, smiling.

## PART 2

*I'm waiting and waiting, but no one's coming.*

Selphie was standing all alone in front of Rain's room, which she had finally managed to find.

*"Come to my room later"*

It was all good and well that she had solved the problem of finding his room after asking around here and there once she had received her instructions, but Rain hadn't come no matter how long she waited.

*What on earth could he want from me...? Surely, surely it's not——!* She had fretted until just past noon. Now, she was hungry, her feet hurt, and in complete desperation she began to think, 'I don't even care what he wants anymore, nope...'

In addition, the guards that frequently passed through the hallway incessantly asked her what she was doing here and demanded that she identified herself. Selphie was fed up and dead tired of having to explain her situation all over again each and every time they did. It was already well past supper and it was dark outside.

She had thought about buying scraps of bread with the small amount of change she had in her pocket, but now it was too late to do even that.

*Haah~.*

Selphie sighed. She wanted to lean against the door and slowly droop down onto the stone floor. Just as she was about to do just that, a lone girl came walking around the corner at the end of the hallway.

Selphie found girl's short-cut hair that rested along her collarbone and her lively, frolicking eyes impressive. She could tell that the girl had a bright personality just by looking at her.

The girl stopped walking the moment she saw Selphie and tilted her head to the side in suspicion.

Her expression became stern as she observed Selphie and stomped her way over.

“What are you doing here?”

“Eh, umm...”

Selphie honestly explained her situation, completely overpowered, and the other girl cheered up in response.

Selphie thought that she was very cute now that the harsh look had left her face.

“Ohh~. Come to think of it, Captain Leni said something about there being a test or something like that. Sorry for suspecting you.”

*What were you suspecting me of?*

Before Selphie could ask, the girl pointed at her flat chest and said,

“I’m Yuri. A squire. We’re in the same boat, so let’s get along!”

“Uh, yes! Please treat me well!”

Selphie bowed her head repeatedly.

*A girl this young is a squire!* Selphie was impressed, completely forgetting that she herself wasn’t any different.

“You don’t have to bow like that! I’m only sixteen, you know? We’re about the same age, right?”

“Yes, pretty much. I’m seventeen.”

“Cool. I was just thinking that there weren’t a lot of girls around here who’re my age, you see. So I’m really happy that someone like you came along, yep!”



Yuri grinned.

Selphie could not help but smile back in return.

Yuri spoke clearly and quickly and she was truly amiable. Selphie, who had been feeling discouraged up until now, felt her spirits lift.

“By the way, about the reason you were called here.”

Completely switching gears to ‘friend mode,’ Yuri lowered her voice despite that no one was nearby and continued,

“don’t you think it’s kinda suspicious? Why the heck would he——I mean, why would the General suddenly say, “come to my room?””

“Do you really think so?”

Selphie casually followed suit and also lowered her voice.

And, just like a housewife gossiping by the village well, Yuri declared, “well of course I do! It’s fishy; it’s definitely fishy!”

——*Selphie’s maidenly virtue was in danger!*

Neither of them said anything out loud, but these were the very words that appeared in their heads. Yuri was so persuasive that Selphie, who had not really worried about it too much, suddenly thought, ‘this might actually be bad.’

As Selphie was tightly hugging on to her own chest, she heard more footsteps.

When she looked up, she saw Rain, whom she and Yuri had just been talking about, and the princess coming closer while engaged in friendly conversation.

*Ehh, he’s coming now——?*

*And I was just about to run away tooo.*

Selphie trembled in fear.

Then, Yuri looked at her as if she was silently saying, “leave it to me!” and blocked the



way in front of her like a human shield.

“...and when I was a kid there was this popular game called ‘The Knight and The Princess,’ and whenever we had spare time——”

Rain was talking passionately about a children’s game while gesturing with his hands. The princess nodded every so often, looking like she didn’t want to miss a single thing he said. Her blue eyes were shining with excitement. Neither Rain nor the princess looked toward the two girls.

“...and that’s why I’ve been an expert at the princess carry since I was a kid——and what’s up?”

Rain finally looked toward them. He continued,

“what are you two doing here together? Did you need me for something?”

——*Huh?*

Selphie stumbled over her own feet.

*He, he forgot... He’s completely forgotten...*

She suddenly became dizzy and her surroundings began to spin. Well, part of it was likely due to how hungry she was.

“Now look here, General!”

Yuri complained in her speechless friend’s place. She gave a short bow to the princess, but she had not even bothered to greet Rain. Selphie figured that she was either on friendly terms with the General, or that she was simply fearless. Yuri continued,

“It wasn’t cool of you to call a young girl over in the first place, but what’s with forgetting that you called her on top of that?! You’re the worst, the absolute worst, for making her stand around and wait in this free~zing cold hallway!”

The princess looked surprised at Yuri’s relentless verbal bashing.

It was only natural. Even if he was a commoner, a high general was still a high general. There was a whole world of a difference between the social standing of a squire, the

lowest military rank, and a high general, one of the most prominent military officers in the kingdom. Yuri could not, and should not, have talked to him in such a manner.

Rain knit his eyebrows ever so slightly.

Selphie was worried that he was angry, but fortunately, she was wrong.

“I called her over...? Oh, right! Yeah, I totally did.”

Now fully understanding the situation, he beckoned to Selphie and continued,

“this isn’t really a good place to talk, so let’s head to my room.”

“Eh?!”

Yuri cried out. She continued,

“why is that? Can’t you just talk here?”

She talked as if she was picking a fight.

“Oh, quit it. You’re just an errand girl, so zip it already. How could someone like you possibly guess at my deep insights?”

Rain’s deep insight wasn’t much to brag about, seeing that he had forgotten that he had called Selphie over, but he forcefully pushed Selphie into his room anyway. Yuri aside, he even asked the princess to wait for a little while and slammed the door shut behind him.

*Is it really okay to make the princess wait?* Selphie worried, despite that it wasn’t really her problem.

“Sorry for making you wait.”

“Oh, it’s nothing...”

“I didn’t call you over for anything important; don’t be so tense. I’m not gonna tell you to strip or anything.”

“Re, really?!”

Rain pulled out a small leather pouch from his pocket and separated out several silver coins in his hands. Then, he thrust the entire handful in Selphie's direction.

"Here."

"Eh?"

"I'm paying you in advance. You're in a rough spot right now, aren't you?"

"Eh, ehh!?"

Overwhelmed with surprise, Selphie accidentally let out a loud cry. To think... that this had been the reason.

"You don't need to be *that* surprised,"

Raid said, and he grabbed Selphie's hand, who was still frozen on the spot, hand and placed the silver in them. His hands were very hard... and warm.

"But... I can't possibly let you do something like this."

"Dummy. I'm not doing anything. I'm just taking this out of your next paycheck."

"But still——"

"You know,"

Rain started as he took large strides across the room to pick up a large leather bag that had rolled to the corner and slung it over his shoulder.

Selphie finally found it in herself to take a look at her surroundings and realized that the room was rather unfurnished.

It only had the bare minimum and most necessary furniture.

If anything stood out in this room, it was only maybe the bed and the desk.

She had thought that Rain was a more flamboyant person, but she now realized that she had been completely wrong about him.

As Selphie continued to raise her personal evaluation of Rain in her head, the man in question bluntly continued,

“you’re my subordinate. So you just need to shut up and listen to what I tell you. If I say that something’s white, then it’s white even if it’s black! Make sure you understand this.”

The content of his words was rather rude, but his voice was gentle.

“I... understand.”

Selphie could only nod. She suddenly felt ashamed of herself. She had been making a huge misunderstanding. She realized that Rain had called her in to his room on purpose out of consideration so that she didn’t have to embarrass herself in front of everyone. There was no other explanation.

*He’s actually very kind... The way he talks and stuff is a bit scary, but he’s actually very kind... He’s kinda cool, maybe.* At that moment, Selphi’s evaluation of Rain shot up in leaps and bounds.

“Um, thank you very much.”

“Yeah. Go and get yourself some nice clothes with that money or something. It’s kinda, you know, when girls dress in tattered clothes like that. Oh, and if you’re gonna buy a skirt, make sure you get a short one. I’m thinking one that has an inseam of seven centimeters is just about right for you.”

“...Okay.”

Selphie was so deeply moved that she consented without properly listening to the details. She was so happy that Rain had been kind to her, and so relieved that she wouldn’t have to go hungry, that she was on cloud nine. All other things aside, the fact that she didn’t have to worry about food anymore impacted her greatly.

“——Oh yeah,”

Rain said with a hand on the doorknob,

“did you happen to feel anything when you first met the Princess?”

“Eh? When I first met Her Highness?”

Selphie blinked and continued,

“I thought that she was very, very pretty. She’ll be a serious beauty in the future.”

“...Is that it? You really didn’t feel anything?”

He was extremely persistent. However, Selphie couldn’t think of anything else so she simply nodded in silence.

Rain wore a complicated expression on his face, as if he had swallowed fished bones and had gotten them stuck in his throat, but he eventually shrugged and opened the door.

The moment she entered the hallway, Selphie said,

“God... thank you so much,”

and prayed. She was rather religious. Sunkwoll was a polytheistic nation with many deities, but Selphie was chiefly a believer of the Goddess Myusra, who governed over war.

Apart from her god, she also offered up thanks to Rain in her heart because she was too embarrassed to say it out loud, but——

“Hey you.”

He knocked her on the head and continued,

“you should be thanking me, not God. And you should at least say something like... you’ll be willing to devote your whole heart and mind to attending me through the night every night until your stamina runs out.”

He was being ridiculous. Yuri, rather than Selphie, who had been awkwardly waiting out in the hallway indignantly asked,

“just what are you talking about? What fishy things were you doing in the room?”

“It’s a secret.”

“...Then, what’s with that huge bag?”

“Oh, these are a change of clothes. I’m switching rooms starting today. There was need for me to act as the Princess’ personal guard.”

Rain’s reply only made Yuri look even more doubtful than she already was.

Then, the princess innocently asked,

“Rain, what does it mean to attend to someone through the night?”

“Eh, uhh... of course.”

Rain started walking as he continued,

“it’s when a man and a woman deepen their friendship and grow closer together.”

——Technically, he wasn’t wrong.

“I never knew!”

Shelfa responded in an extremely disappointed voice.

She grabbed on to Rain’s sleeve in a bit of a panic and continued,

“in that case, please attend the night with me as well!”

Selphie did not hear what Rain had said in response. He and the princess had already turned the corner. Beside her, Yuri squared her shoulders and said, “what’s with that attitude?”

Selphie, however, continued to stare in the direction in which Rain had left with her cheeks slightly colored.



Rain escorted Shelfa to the entrance to the royal private baths (as named by Rain) in the deepest parts of the royal palace because she had said, “it’s almost time for a bath.”

Security in this part of the palace was obviously strict, and you would be forced to turn back unless you were royalty or someone with as much social standing as Rain, a high general. It spelled out your end when the soldier on watch duty forced you to identify yourself and said, “try somewhere else.”

Actually, even Rain had been courteously told, “my apologies, General Rain, but we were told not to allow you to pass,” and had been turned back up until recently.

But the situation was completely different now.

Rain’s reception in court had risen tremendously now that Shelfa’s imperial reign drew near. After all, he enjoyed a trust so complete from the princess herself that it was foolish even to call it overwhelming. Shelfa’s treatment of Rain could not even be compared to the previous king’s, who had made his disdain clear every time they so much as looked at each other.

Thus, Rain could now freely enter the depths of the palace that he had not been able to set foot in before.

“Aren’t princesses generally supposed to be accompanied by two or three ladies-in-waiting when they bathe?”

Rain asked out of simple curiosity before the arched entrance to the baths that were so large that Rain could not help but wonder what kinds of giants they had been made for.

“I was until recently. But I find it easier to relax when I’m alone, and...”

“And?”

“I get embarrassed when people see me naked, even if they’re women... So I asked them not to come. Before, they wouldn’t agree no matter how many times I’d ask, but nowadays people always do as I ask of them.”

Shelfa cast her eyes down while hugging her change of clothes to her chest and looked

rather adorable.

Rain smiled in a cynical manner.

“Well it’s only natural that your words hold more weight now that you’ll be the next queen. You’re free to do whatever you want now, Little one. Go ahead and be as selfish as you want,”

he irresponsibly spurred her on.

Rain thought that since Shelfa had lived a fairly unpleasant life up until now, she should be allowed to be reasonable selfish.

“I don’t really mind. I’m perfectly happy already. —Because you’re here by my side, Rain.”

Shelfa happily smiled and showed off her pearly white teeth. Her smile readily expressed her inner feelings, or perhaps they should be called her love, and even Rain could not find it in himself to make a frivolous comment.

Instead of acting embarrassed, he waved a hand at her and said,

“alright, I get it, so hurry up and go take your bath. I’ll be waiting here.”

Shelfa looked up at him when he gave her a light push on her willowy back.

“No, since the opportunity arose, there’s something I’d like to do. I’d be happy if you came in with me, Rain.”

“...Come again?”

*An opportunity for what?*

“But didn’t you just say that you don’t like it when people see you naked?”

“Of course, you’re an exception, Rain.”

Shelfa said without a delay and without even looking excited.

“No, that’s still not something I should be doing. I’ll be patient and wait for you here.”



——Was what Rain did *not* say.

Instead, he replied, “oh, really? Well if you don’t mind, I don’t mind if I do, either,” and readily complied to bathing together.

Shelfa made sure to lock the door once they entered inside.

There were marble tiles covering the floor inside, and it was so spacious that Rain wondered if this was the bath for a moment before he realized that it was the dressing room. There were several silver pedestals that looked like giant candlesticks lined up against the wall with baskets woven with wisteria sitting on top of them. It looked like you were supposed to put your clothes in them.

Moreover.

There was a mirror that was several meters long in diameter set up on the opposite wall. Along it were several gorgeous cloth-covered stools. Shelfa didn’t need to use them yet, but they were probably meant to be a place to do one’s makeup. As if to prove that theory, there was even a massive wardrobe standing tall in the corner.

When Rain opened it up for the heck of it, he found a mountain of gaudy dresses. As a commoner, the entire place pissed him off.

“Ugh... So that King Douglass leisurely took baths in a place like this... Hey that kinda pisses me off.”

“No. Father used the men’s bath. This is the women’s bath.”

“I know that there aren’t that many royals, but this is getting more annoying by the minute... It’s like they’re making light of how regular people live. Even I, a high-general, don’t have a bath this large in my castle (Cortecreas Castle).”

“Oh... I’m sorry.”

Shelfa apologetically lowered her long eyelashes even though she wasn’t at fault. She had already began taking off her dress and had partially exposed her white undergarments, and did not seem to mind Rain’s presence. It was as if she wasn’t shy around him at all.

“Don’t be, it’s not like it’s your fault or anything.”

Rain lightly tapped her uncovered delicate shoulder and began to undress as well.

The dressing room had been astonishingly large, but the baths further into the area were on a different scale altogether. Not only was it spacious and open in length and width alike, but it’s ceiling was also several stories high.

The bathtub itself was circular and large enough to swim in and could have easily fit several dozens of people inside with room to spare. Furthermore, and Rain could not decide whether it was of bad taste or not, there was a statue of a goddess with a jar splashing hot water into the bathtub over her shoulder.

The bath was so excessively luxurious that it practically could have been a symbol of the nobility.

“Well isn’t this extravagant...”

Rain growled after a brief glance around the area.

The bath looked like it would cost a fortune just to maintain.

It was apparently located near a gable facing the innermost depths of the palace, and there were several square windows lined up along the main wall. The windows were several meters high, so there was no worry about and creeps being able to peer inside.

“Hmph, I almost want to come here every day.”

“If it’s alright with you, Rain, I’d be happy to come here with you every day,”

Shelfa, who had entered the room first, responded with a smile.

She made no particularly unsightly attempts to hide her naked body.

Instead, she blushed slightly upon seeing Rain and lowered her eyes somewhat.

Then, she continued in a quiet voice,

“...you are rather different from me, I see.”

Instead of replying immediately, Rain splashed some water on himself next to her and slowly submerged himself. The bath was rather deep... Someone with a smaller build really could have swam in it if they wanted to. He rested his magic sword, the one thing that he had refused to let go of until now, against the marble bathtub and let out a soft sigh.

“Well yeah, ‘course I am. I’m a man and you’re a woman. By any chance, is this the first time you’ve seen a man’s body?”

Shelfa replied, “yes,” in a voice so small that it could have belonged to a mosquito.

“Hmmm. That kinda makes me feel like I’ve gained something pretty nice. In other words, that means that I’m the first guy who gets to see you naked too, right?”

“Yes... The first and the only, Rain,”

Shelfa nodded.

She was still standing upright, and had made no attempt to come closer to Rain’s side yet.

She simply kept her eyes glued on Rain with a look of deep determination.

“...Um, there’s something that I’d like to do before I go in.”

“Oh?... In the bathroom?”

Rain asked, somewhat teasingly.

“...Yes. I believed that it was the most appropriate to do this while naked.”

Even Rain was rendered speechless at Shelfa’s words, which would have caused an uproar had they been said publicly.

While Rain was still thinking through what she had said, Shelfa silently made her way toward Rain and got down on her knees before him. Then, she said,

“it’ll be over soon.”

She looked incredibly serious.

When Rain instinctively nodded, Shelfa gently placed her right hand on his chest and began to speak.

“As one of the Five Great Houses, the descendent of Sunkwoll thusly vows.

That mine life walks with thee for all of eternity, if such is thy wish.

That mine soul, too, walks with thee for all of eternity! At times as sword, at times as shield, I offer up this body. That there may be no falsehood in this vow, even should all of fate turn against thee.”

She smiled radiantly as Rain blinked his black eyes and continued,

“I declareth myself Shelfa Iras Sunkwoll—— My lord, I beg that this name be forever engraved in thy breast... For it is the name of one who has pledged herself to thee.”

A moment after she was done, Shelfa withdrew her hand from his chest.

Then, she entered the water and sat down next to Rain like everything was normal. She seemed to be quite finished with what she had wanted to do.

“Wait, aren’t *you* the ‘lord’ here? It seemed pretty exaggerated from my point of view, but what was it all about?”

“Please don’t pay it too much mind. It was just supposed to be a slight warning for myself...”

Shelfa relaxed and let out a long sigh.... For some absurd reason, this gave Rain a bad feeling.

As if she had picked up his apprehensions, Shelfa let out a chuckle and said,

“my vow wasn’t meant to tie down your freedom, Rain. I was the only one who was bound.”

*Tying people down and being bound—I have no idea what you’re talking about, but that’s pretty hardcore!* But, now wasn’t the time to be hung up over something like that. Although, Rain could not help but admit that he was pretty intrigued.

Instead of explaining herself any further, however, Shelfa gently leaned back against Rain. She did not seem to want to be pressed for answers.

“Well, all’s good and fine as long as you’re satisfied.”

Rain placed his hand on her golden hair and rocked her lightly.

He was a little impressed after seeing Shelfa up close as she gently laughed.

“Even still, you really do have amazing looks. There’s absolutely nothing to even complain about even after looking at you up close.”

He purposely held back from saying how absolutely stunning she would be——in another five or six years or so. Even Rain knew how to be considerate from time to time.

Shelfa gave her thanks in a small voice.

“Thank you very much. But I think otherwise.... But, since there’s nothing I can do about my appearance, I’d at least like to grow up as soon as possible...”

He could have been reading too much into it, but Rain felt that there was something hidden behind her words.

“I can’t even begin to imagine anyone more beautiful than you. Besides, why do you want to grow up so fast to begin with?”

“Because if I was prettier... and if I was older, you might come to care for me much more than you do now, Rain.”

“No, you’re wrong about that. In that case, wouldn’t I just be some frivolous guy who only cared about looks? There’s no point in liking someone only for who they are on the outside.”

Rain subconsciously smiled wryly and continued,

“and I have nothing against you as you are now.”

At Rain’s words, Shelfa sat up straighter inside of the bathtub.

“But... at that time, you...”

She closed her mouth without finishing her sentence and rested her gaze down at the gentle slope of her chest.

Rain did not have to ask about the time she was referring to. He knew that she was speaking of the time they had snuck out of the ball that had been held after the last battle and Shelfa had “confessed” her feelings for him in the garden. There was no way he would have forgotten.

Rain had not given her a clear reply at the time. It hadn’t been because he disliked her or because he was bothered by their age difference. It was simply that he was unable to respond to her feelings for him.

He had realized that he would hurt her no matter how he answered and had said,

*“...sorry. I’m not able to give you a reply just yet.”*

It had been the only thing he could say at the time.

*——I let her die without being able to protect her, so it’s wrong of me to be happy by myself after all this time,*

whispered the voice of his other self in his heart.

Shelfa reached out through the steam and touched Rain’s cheek as if she had heard this nonexistent voice.

“...What’s up?”

“Rain, you’re much too kind...”

Rain opened his black eyes wide in surprise as her words gripped his chest. It had been a coincidence, but *she* had also said something similar once.

*“Rain, you’re way too kind...”*

——*Fina.*

Rain pursed his lips together before her name escaped them. Shelfa stroked his cheek as if in response, perhaps because she had felt the slight movements in his facial muscles.

“People’s memories fade away as the years pass, and even memories of someone who was once precious to you is forgotten little by little... They become buried deep within the memory and are only recalled from time to time. It’s a sad thing, but I believe that after a long... long time, memories change, no matter how much you loved that person.

“But...” Shelfa trailed off as she leaned back against Rain. She continued,

“but, Rain, you’re unable to forget, aren’t you? Because you’re so very, very kind, kinder than anyone else, you do not allow your memories to fade away. You constantly blame yourself and you never forgive yourself... even though you’ve done nothing wrong, Rain.”

Her sapphire eyes were moist as she looked up at him, as if she was about to cry at any moment. Then, she said,

“it’s unfortunate that I can’t share your pain... But, one day...”

“You...”

Rain wanted to click his tongue at how his voice cracked as he spoke. He licked his lips and started again,

“you’re quite the poet, Little one.... I’m not that great of a guy, you know.”

Shelfa simply smiled.

Before replying, she gently wrapped her wet arms around Rain’s back.

“One day, I want to become someone strong like you, Rain. So that I, too, can support you from time to time, instead of only being protected one-sidedly. Because I... love

you, Rain.”

As Rain was rendered unable to speak, she drew closer and whispered into his ear,

“I won’t give up. I’ll wait for however long I must. Forever, and ev~er.”

Succumbing to a sudden urge, Rain gently pushed her back and peered into her large eyes.

“...Rain,”

Shelfa called out to him in a husky voice. She closed her eyes just as she was, with her cheeks blushing red.

Silently, Rain drew his lips nearer, and——

“This smell—— tch.”

He noticed a sickly-sweet scent and the presence of somebody nearby.

Shelfa was taken aback as she watched Rain draw his magic sword with her eyes wide open in surprise.

“Rain, what in the world...”

She tried to stand up, but found herself staggering.

She had already been affected by the smell.

“It’s not a big deal. Just take your time and stay in the water, Little one. We just happen to have an uninvited guest.”

“E, ehh?!”

Her handsome face twisted in shock. She tried to follow Rain’s line of sight and turn around to face the window behind her... but her eyes were already clouding over. She felt her body stumble again.



“It’s a flower with blue petals called the Ashimaru. It grows further up north. They give off this really strong smell when you grind them up that has the effect of putting people to sleep,”

Rain explained in a matter-of-fact manner as he helped Shelfa stay up. He continued,

“well, don’t sweat it. I’ll take care of everything while you’re asleep. You should just go to sleep without worrying about a thing.”

Normally, she would have relaxed at his words, but today, the panic did not leave her.

She continued to struggle within his arms.

Rain only grasped the reason behind her behavior after watching her incessantly struggle to cover up her chest.

“...Uh~, I’ll make sure no one can see you. I won’t let our guests have even the smallest peek, so there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

At his words, Shelfa immediately settled down and readily entrusted her body over to him. As he’d thought, that was what she had been worried about. She pried open her eyes and smiled weakly.

“I don’t need to ask... you to be... careful... do I... Rain...?”

“That goes without saying.”

Rain flashed her a grin.

He smiled his usual brazen smile, and the solemn expression he had been wearing until just recently had disappeared without a trace.

Shelfa smiled once more in apparent relief as her head dropped down.

“Still, do you normally worry more about being seen naked than about losing your life...? Well, I guess it just means that she trusts me,”

Rain whispered as he carefully leaned Shelfa back against the tub so that she would not fall over sideways and extended his palm out toward her body.

Then, a low hum rang throughout the room as a shining magical barrier covered Shelfa's entire being.

Now, no one could see her, and he could guarantee her safety.

"Well then."

Instead of immediately standing up, Rain simply made himself at home with his magic sword in hand.

He lightly closed his eyes and searched for the presence he felt.

"Lessee... there are three, four... seven... of you under the window? You were probably planning to break in once we were asleep. Well, kuddos to you guys."

The ends of his lips curled upwards as he snickered.

*Unfortunately, I won't be falling asleep no matter how long you wait. I'm a human who also carries the 'power' of a mythical beast (a dragon) right now.*

Indeed, anything that didn't work on a mythical beast would have no effect on Rain as well.

Which was why Rain simply stayed in the bath instead of getting up. If the other side was going to come at him eventually, there was no reason for him to stir up a fuss first. Naturally, the possibility that he could get killed did not even cross Rain's mind.

There was no way that he would fall behind an assassin who only knew how to sneak around like a rat... he thought.

"I'll leave one, and kill the rest!"

he said with cold indifference as he silently bided his time.

*"Rain, you're way too kind..."*

The words that he had once been told a long time ago echoed in his mind again, but he shook his head and cleared them away.

Time would never turn back no matter how hard he chased after the past.

The kind boy, who had definitely existed once, was no longer anywhere to be found. He had already come so far that he could no longer turn back——

“Sorry, Fina. I’ve changed... At any rate, I don’t think I’ll be able to face you anymore.”

As soon as Rain let out a sigh, several black shadows jumped at him from the window.

## PART 3

"And so... you left one alive and killed the rest?"

"Yep,"

Rain nodded without a hint of diffidence in his gesture.

Ralphus shot a questioning look at Rain, who was reclining back against the sofa with his legs outstretched in front of him.

"With your ability, you should have been able to capture all of them alive."

Rain gulped down the liqueur in the glass in his hand and smiled a terrifying smile.

"I don't care about the fate of bastards who gang up to attack a girl seven to one."

"...Well, enough about that. There's one more thing I'd like to confirm with you, as you were bathing together with Her Highness.... So in other words, were you both... unclothed?"

"Well, yeah. People don't typically bathe with their clothes on."

"Hmmm... And she recited some sort of strange incantation to you?"

Ralphus poured himself some wine in his own glass and sat down in front of Rain. He peered at the latter with a curious look. When Rain stared back at him, he gradually smiled.

He was not the type of man to grow envious of Shelfa's and Rain's close relationship. This was why Rain confided in him so readily... and why his reaction bothered Rain so much.

"I see. So Her Highness adores you that much, huh."

"I wouldn't say those two are necessarily causative of each other. I mean, all we did was take a bath together?"

"What, you don't know?"

Ralphus said, stopping his glass perfectly on his lips. He continued,

“Her Highness showed you her naked body, and made that kind of vow to you on top of that——”

He paused mid-sentence and shook his head. Then, he laughed in a teasing manner, which was rare for him, and said,

“no, don’t worry about it. You’ll understand eventually.”

“Quit laughing like that, it’s creepy... And it doesn’t suit you at all.”

“Haha... is that so? Incidentally, is it all right for you to be away from Her Highness right now?”

Ralphus blatantly changed the subject.

Rain stared back at his friend with suspicion as he told him,

“Gunther is with her. He’s a lot stronger than Leni is, after all. He’ll be alright no matter what kind of opponent comes after him. Plus, I’ll go back to her after this. For now, I have to give you my report, don’t I?”

While it looked like Rain was here for a drink rather than to “give his report,” Ralphus smiled and concurred. He understood that Rain was properly attending to the Princess’ safety regardless of what his words might suggest.

——Someone knocked from the other side of the door.

When Ralphus asked, “who is it?”, Leni replied, “excuse me~, is my general here?”

“What’s up with this ‘my general’ business?”

Rain asked with a scowl as he stood up and opened the door. He continued,

“what is it? We were in the middle of an extremely serious discussion.”

“Or so you say, but is that alcohol I smell?”

Leni humbly refuted. When Rain glared back at him, he panicked and waved his hands

as he continued,

“no. It’s not like I have any problems with it or anything! That aside, well... we have a visitor who wishes to meet with you, General.”

“At this time of day?”

“Yessir. Though I tried to tell them to come back tomorrow. They seem to be a knight candidate, and they say they want to see you no matter what——”

“Wait, hold it right there! The exam’s already over. Why’re they here *now*?!”

“Well, that’s what I wondered too... Anyways, they’re incredibly stubborn. Won’t you try meeting with them, General? The guards standing watch at the gates are a bit troubled too, since they’re unable to move the lever.”

“Hm~m...”

Rain brushed back his hair and suddenly thought up of something.

“Are they a guy or a girl?”

“Yes? Oh, it’s a man.”

“Chase him away!”

Rain immediately replied and tried to close the door shut, but Leni had stuck his foot inside with surprising speed.

“Wah! Please wait a minute! Just hear the guy out, please! I couldn’t chase him away for the life of me. You’re probably the only one who can do something about him, General!”

Leni begged and clasped his hands together in front of himself.

Evidently, the visitor was a rather shameless guy.

“Ugh. Okay, I get it. I’ll go, so quit clinging to me!”

Visibly annoyed, Rain turned to Ralphus and continued,

“on that note, I’ll be out for a bit. You should go to bed for the night already. Save interrogating the prisoner for tomorrow.”

“I can’t. It’s about time for Her Highness to wake up, so I should get going as well,”

Ralphus said as he stood up. He continued,

“good grief, what a busy evening we’ve had today.”

He had been planning on sleeping for the first time in a while, but it seemed that his slumber would have to be delayed for quite a while yet.

Rain steeled himself as he left to deal with his stubborn visitor.

He was just a little envious of Shelfa, who was still fast asleep under the effects of the Ashimaru.



After he reluctantly made his way over to the castle gates, Rain understood where Leni had been coming from and agreed, “I see, this guy really does look difficult.”

The man in question was sitting down right in front of the castle gates with his arms crossed and his eyes closed. The gate guards and Senoa, who was accompanied by Selphie for some reason, were at his sides pestering him, but he did not even bother to open his eyes at the commotion.

He simply sat there like an aloof stone idol.

It was like his spirit was crying out, *I won’t move even if you make me!*

He had very short black hair that with white streaks and a face filled with wrinkles. His figure, which was wrapped up in a leather jacket to ward off the cold, was very burly for his age. It was clearly the body of someone who had fought for a living.

If Rain summed up his impression of the man with one word... it would have been: geezer.

In two words, it would have been: shameless geezer. In any case, no matter how you looked at him, he looked like any old geezer you could find in a tavern somewhere. He

looked like the type of guy who'd drunkenly babble, "got a nice ass there, Miss, heheheh."

Yet, only his well-built body suggested otherwise.

Anyhow, even Senoa, of all people, looked relieved when she saw Rain make his entrance, as the geezer in question had been giving her a rather difficult time.

"Hey, old man!"

Rain roared, sharply and suddenly. He continued,

"quit making trouble for us. The exam's already over, so go home already!"

While his reaction would have been questionably different had the visitor been a beauty in the prime of her youth, Rain was rather cold and indifferent toward old men.

He quickly rolled up his sleeves with the intent of chasing the visitor away with brute force if push came to shove.

On the other hand, the old man suddenly opened his black eyes wide at the sound of Rain's voice.

"Oho~!"

He stood up so fast that you would have never guessed how still he had been just moments before and grabbed Rain's hand before the latter could pull away.

"Well isn't this nostalgic! You haven't changed at all since I met you ten years ago! What a surprise!"

"...I have no idea who you are, old man. And before that, let go of me!"

Rain cruelly shook the old man off. He had only felt disgusted after having his hand held by an old geezer.

"Heh. You're as unsociable as ever, aren't you?"

The old man laughed heartily, unbothered by Rain's reaction. Eventually, he took a good look at Rain and said,



“but putting your manners aside, you have a fairly different impression about you than you had before. Ten years ago, I thought you were a pretty cool guy, but now, how should I put this, your face hasn’t changed too much, but you have this brazen look on your face, like you’ve gotten cheekier than ever or something.”

“...Look here. Are you trying to pick a fight, old man? Things will get scary if I get mad at you, you hear?! I’ll say this again, but I have no idea who you——”

Rain suddenly stopped mid-sentence and scrutinized the old man up and down once more. Something prickled from deep within the reaches of his memory, prompting him to ask,

“...old man... no, are you... Gazaram, by any chance?”

“That I am! You remembered! Well, isn’t this nice? And here I was all disappointed that you didn’t remember me.”

The old man... rather, Gazaram spread his mouth into a broad smile and laughed loudly. He had grown much older than the last time that Rain had seen him. The past ten years had definitely made their mark on Gazaram’s face.

“You were acquainted with him...”

Senoa interrupted, visibly exhausted.

Leni, Selphie, and the gate guards simply watched Gazaram laugh with blank expressions on their faces.

“Well... I guess you could say that... But man, you’ve seriously aged,”

Rain said his thoughts as they came to mind.

He felt as little lonely, as he was someone who could no longer age.

“Harsh, aren’t you? Well, it’s definitely something you would say. But this is normal, you know? You’re just too young. It doesn’t look like it’s been ten years, no matter how hard I look at you.... I guess the rumors were true.”

“Well, yeah.”

Rain simply shrugged. Naturally, he did not need anyone to tell him that the “rumors” that Gazaram were referring to were about him being a Dragon Slayer. He continued,

“so... did you come all this way just to see me? No, that can’t be it. I heard something about you being a knight candidate.”

The old man’s face, who had been laughing heartily, subtly changed as soon as the words left Rain’s mouth. It looked as if he was embarrassed about something, despite his age.

“Y, yeah. That’s... I heard that you were recruiting knights based on a new criterion. I was wondering if... um~... you would possibly pick me up as well.”

“Aren’t you already the captain of the garrison?”

“Well, I——”

Gazaram gave a side glance at the people who were listening in with great enthusiasm and continued in a quiet voice,

“I was fired. They wanted me to retire because of my age.... Supposedly, having an old captain made them uneasy——oh, but...!”

In a panic, he vehemently added,

“I can still fight! It wasn’t as if I couldn’t fulfill my duties properly at the garrison or anything. It’s just that the hard-headed government officials kept yapping on and on about how troubling it was that the captain of the garrison was already fifty-five! So, I can still be useful here, I’ll make sure of it! Besides, I’m not asking you to make an exception for me by directly promoting me to a knight. I’m fine with being a squire, of course. So——”

“Hold on a second, Gazaram.”

Rain stopped Gazaram with a wave of his hand as the latter became more desperate in his appeals. He continued,

“hold on.... I want to ask: why do you want to be a squire after everything? Before you served at the garrison, you were a knight-captain of the Fanooj Knight Order, weren’t you? Well, that kingdom has several knight orders, so you weren’t the only knight-

captain there, but it's still a creditable position. Also, you should have made quite a nice sum of money while serving as captain of the garrison, so you should have enough to live comfortably. So, why?"

Senoa and the rest of the audience looked surprised to hear that Gazaram and once been a knight-captain of Fanooj. It was only natural. Although it was a small kingdom, Fanooj employed a "complete meritocracy" like Zarmine, and serving as a knight-captain in a kingdom like that was a remarkably amazing thing to do.

It wasn't even possible to become a normal knight if you only had mediocre abilities in Fanooj.

However, Gazaram, whose personal history had been revealed, did not look even the slightest bit proud of himself, but rather drooped his eyes down in shame instead.

It was possible that he felt that he was quite pathetic for begging to become a squire after having climbed all the way up to the position of captain.

The old warrior spoke in a tone that had completely lost his initial vigor,

"...the past is the past, and the present is the present. Regardless of what happened in the past, I've become old enough to get fired from the garrison now. I know that it's high time for me to retire. But... even still..."

He lifted his wrinkled face and looked like he was gazing at something far away as he continued,

"maybe it's because I grew up in a lineage of knights, but I was only taught how to fight when I was a kid growing up. There's no way I can find another way to live after all this time, and neither do I want to."

His voice grew steadily weaker as he added,

"and besides, I don't know how to do anything other than fight with a sword in hand. It's embarrassing to admit, but I really don't know how to do anything else. I'd much rather die on the battlefield than sit around doing nothing until the day I die."

"I see, is that so?"

Rain purposefully replied in a light tone. He felt that it would probably be rude to

clumsily sympathize with Gazaram's situation.

The man called Gazaram could potentially be a mirror image of his own future self—or so Rain thought. There were times when living a normal life could become agony for people who had lived all of their lives as warriors.

Gazaram, the man standing before him, was likely also someone who could not choose a path other than to die in battle. He had probably never even thought of wanting to die peacefully in bed.

*He's just like me...*

"An, anyway!"

Gazaram emphatically pressed on as Rain fell into silence and added,

"none of that stuff matters, nope. I can still actively serve as a rank and file soldier. I can still fight properly, so please make me a squire."

"Gazaram."

Rain gently raised his hand and continued,

"I've already made my decision. Sorry, but I have a policy of not doing anything pointless."

Gazaram groaned.

His rough breathing turned into a long, drawn-out sigh.

"Pointless... I see, it was pointless..."

There was no anger in his voice, and only the fatigue of an aged knight colored though.

*"General!"*

Selphie's and Senoa's shrill voices pierced the air. They were both startled, and they frowned as they exchanged looks. Senoa, who was just the slightest bit faster, said,

"your words were much too heartless. It is more fitting for you as someone in a higher position to kindly appoint him as a squire."

"Hold it right there!"

Rain said as he poked at Senoa's blonde head.

Somewhat offended, he explained,

"you guys need to stop jumping to wrong conclusions! I'm just saying that I won't hire him as a squire!"

Suddenly, the life returned to Gazaram's face.

Filled with smiles and joy, he pressed Rain for more.

"Then——"

"Didn't I just tell you? I don't like doing things that are pointless. Gazaram, you're in luck. Nicely enough, I've reorganized my troops just recently.... From today onward, I'll have you be a brigadier presiding over a thousand men. Work hard and make yourself useful to me."

Gazaram looked like he had gone into shock after hearing Rain's words.

No one could blame him, as a brigadier was technically a type of general. Naturally, the rank of brigadier was higher than the rank of knight-captain, which was the position he had served in his younger days.

Once the muscles in his faced had relaxed, Gazaram suddenly broke out into a dramatic blush and teared up.

"You... no, milord, you're..."

He tried to say something, but his voice failed him.

Then, he reverently bent down on one knee before his liege lord.

“...I, Gazaram, will never forget this debt of gratitude for your kindness today. From now on I will work for you, and I will never leave your side until death falls upon me...”

“Don’t just suddenly change your attitude like that, it’s gross. I get it, so stop this and go already.”

Rain waved his hand and meant for Gazaram to stand up. He disliked the melancholy atmosphere.

Then, Senoa snapped out of her stupor and fiercely protested,

“Th, that’s much too generous of you——”

At the same time, Selphie dreamily muttered, “that’s so wonderful... Lord Rain,” causing Senoa’s cheeks to twitch.

Senoa quickly distanced herself from the other girl.

“Did you just say... Lord Rain? Don’t, don’t tell me that you fell in...”

she timidly asked, though Selphie did not hear her. The latter had been too busy star~ing at Rain in awe.

Her answer, however, was obvious even if it hadn’t been put into words.

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T/N On military ranks in *Rain*:

To be honest, I have no idea how the military system works in this novel series. It's confusing as hell, and doesn't seem to follow any conventional ranking system that exists in the real world. To help clear this up a little, and to justify some of my translation choices, I'll list the ranks that we've seen so far here in no particular order. I might consider making an entire page about this later if I ever get to the point where I actually understand what's going on.

上將軍: High general – Rain's rank

大將軍: Grand general – probably the Chandrys equivalent of high general

副官: Aide (/adjutant) – for all intents and purposes, they appear to serve as seconds-in-command

隊長/騎士隊長: Captain/Knight-captain – a type of commanding officer. Leni's and Senoa's rank

騎士: Knight – used interchangeably with 'soldier' (兵/兵士)

騎士見習い: Squire (lit. 'knight-apprentice') – the lowest rank in the army

五人(部)隊長: Squad leader (lit. '(squad) captain of five men')

百人(部)隊長: Centurion (lit. '(squad) captain of a hundred men') – seems to be a relatively high rank from what I can tell, but who knows

\*千人隊長: Brigadier (lit. 'captain of a thousand men') – evidently also a type of general in terms of rank

Covert operatives, like Gunther, seem to exist outside of this ranking system.

\*I chose the term 'brigadier' because 1) it is often used interchangeably with 'brigadier general,' and 2) they are known to command battalions, which were the closest unit to 1,000 men that I could find (1 battalion = 300~800 soldiers). The novel mentions that brigadiers outrank knight-captains, but I have no idea if this means that Gazaram

now outranks Senoa/Leni (who are knight-captains/captains) or not because Senoa and Leni are also direct aides to Rain and also command 1,000 soldiers each.

It is also entirely possible that knight-captain is a catch-all term for any type of commander officer including, but not limited to, captains and centurions.

tl;dr: Translating the military system in this series is a nightmare, and if you understand this stuff better than I do, please help. TvT

Edit: Gazaram is also an aide to Rain, making him the same rank as Senoa and Leni



# CHAPTER 3

## DAY OF THE DEBUT

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### PART 1

Over ten days had passed since Gazaram had entered Rain's command.

No other suspicious individuals had appeared after the attack in the baths, and a stretch of generally peaceful days continued.

And, while today was the day before the coronation ceremony, it could be said that it would be infinitely busier than the day of the actual ceremony itself.

As for the reason why——most of the people of Sunkwoll did not know Princess Shelfa's name, much less what she looked like, so the day before the ceremony was to be "the new ruler's debut," as aptly named by Rain.

That being said, it wasn't a very elaborate affair, and Shelfa would simply dress up like a princess and circle the capital city, Lydia, in a carriage... such was a summary of the event.

Rain also informally emphasized the aim of "showing off Princess Shelfa's beauty to completely secure her popularity with the masses!"

It was an incredibly cunning and blunt objective, but, as Rain put it, "the people were more likely to support a lovely young girl rather than a moody, smelly, middle-aged man (the previous king)." Of course, it needn't be said that it was Rain who had proposed the debut to begin with.

And thus, it was finally the morning of the debut, and Rain was seriously and dutifully——*not* attending to Shelfa's security at her side, and was instead scarfing down breakfast at the plaza that was used exclusively as a place to eat.

Shelfa was currently being waited upon by a large number of ladies-in-waiting and changing into a brand-new dress, so Rain would not have been allowed at her side anyway. Well, it wasn't as if Shelfa herself cared about Rain watching her change, but the people around her would have stirred up a fuss.

As such, Rain had filched a bottle of liqueur from the kitchens and was drinking it straight from the bottle as a means to treat himself after his meal during his short break.

Alcohol was especially good when drunk in the morning.

However, Leni hurried over to him in the middle of his long-awaited drinking bout.

“Aah! You’re drinking again~?!”

“Who cares, it’s just a little! It’s not like I can get drunk no matter how much I drink anyway, so there’s nothing for you to nitpick about.... Besides, why aren’t you out guarding the Princess, huh?!”

When Rain scolded him back, Leni responded,

“oh, that’s right! The Princess, she was calling for you, General. She wanted you come asap. She was really earnest about it too.”

“——Seriously? I was with her just thirty minutes ago.”

“We~ll...”

Leni smiled a small, wry smile and said,

“she sees you as her pillar of support. I’m sure she gets anxious when you’re not with her. Can’t blame her, since it’s not like the uproar over the assassination attempt has died down yet.”

He was right about that.

The lone prisoner that Rain had captured the other day had been found dead the very next morning. They could not figure out how or why. Guards had been patrolling the prisons, ensuring that no one had entered or left the area, but the prisoner had been dead by the time they had brought him food. It was made more unsettling by the fact that they could not figure out whether the man had committed suicide or if he had been murdered.

Worse, they had suddenly lost all contact with the agent that Rain had sent inside the assassin’s guild from which the commission was thought to have originated from.

They didn't even know if this was because the agent had been outed and silenced, which would make it all the more difficult to figure out who the client was.

Rain pushed his bottle aside and muttered to himself,

"well... it's only natural for her to get anxious. Still, and she can take all the time she needs, but that child should start expressing interest in other people besides me, yeah."

"Wait... caller her 'that child' is... She's technically our ruler, you know? Though I get what you mean. I'd thought that she'd break out of her shell by now, but she doesn't show any signs of doing so at all,"

Leni grumbled his misgivings and nonchalantly reached out for the bottle. However, Rain snatched it up first.

"Don't you touch this! You're already a lightweight as it is."

"...That's too bad. Well then, please do hurry. Her Highness is calling for you."

"I get it, I'll go.... And here I wanted another two or~ three bottles..."

"Look here... you're in an enviable position where the Princess is clearly friendly to you, aren't you? I can barely get Yuri to eat lunch with me."

"What's this about Yuri? I don't give a crap about your love life,"

Rain readily brushed the matter aside and stood up in good grief. He had already been thinking about returning anyhow.

He took one last rueful look at the bottle on the table and headed for the room where the Princess was waiting for him.



"Has anything changed? ——Or so I say, but I'm sure nothing has. It hasn't been that long since I left,"

Rain asked Gazaram, who was standing in front of the room. The latter smiled in a truly old man-ish manner and teased back,

“there’s nothing out of the ordinary, but the Princess is waiting for you, you know? She’s been peeking out of her room for a while now, checking to see if you’ve arrived yet. But man~, our Princess here’s one unbelievable beauty. If I was only thirty years younger, my heart would be all aflutter and I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night because of it.”

“Sir Gazaram.”

Senoa, who had been standing straight upright in attention, sharply knit her beautifully-shaped eyebrows and continued,

“there was a lot of unnecessary information in your report. You only need to answer the question that was asked of you.”

She spoke strict and stuffy words with a strict and stuffy expression. It was likely that, as Rain had expected, she did not get along too well with Gazaram. Rain thought that it was a rather troublesome issue but brushed it aside, as if it had absolutely nothing to do with him.

But then again, Gazaram did not seem to be the slightest bit perturbed by Senoa’s feelings and remained as jovial as ever.

“Now, don’t be all stiff like that, sister. How about a drink together later? And then we can all be good friends and whatnot?”

Gazaram said, suddenly on full-throttle old man mode.

Leni stared at him as if he was saying, *he’s really brave...*

“Sis, sister!?”

Senoa was slightly taken aback at first, and then her expression turned more severe by the moment.

“Hey, Gazaram,”

Rain butted in. He continued,

“tease her when I’m not around. Else, she’ll get all loud and fussy again.”

“General! Just what is that supposed to——”

“Well then, I’ll trust you to keep up guard duty.”

Rain opened the door without bothering to knock and took refuge inside the moment that Senoa whipped back her blonde hair and headed for him. He made sure to lock the door behind him. The voices outside became so quiet that he could barely believe it. The soundproofing of the walls of the royal palace were as amazing as he expected, unlike their cheaper and flimsier counterparts.

When he turned to face the front——

Shelfa had turned around halfway from the window with her eyes wide open, likely because she had been surprised by the sudden intrusion.

However, her openly wary expression soon gave way into a smile as she tottered over to him.

“Rain!”

She immediately reached out for him. Her palms were covered with sweat, possibly because of how nervous she had been.

“Seeing as there aren’t any ladies-in-waiting around, I’m guessing you’re done changing?”

“...Yes.”

Shelfa dropped her gaze down to the fluffy carpet and nodded.

Her silk dress had a white motif with a bold cut at the chest and an airy, princess-style skirt. Rain didn’t know who had designed the dress, but the tailor seemed to have gleaned that Shelfa looked good in white.

In fact, she would probably be rushed by a flood of stares the moment she stepped out into town...

Shelfa, however, did not look too well. Rain could tell that she was shivering through their interconnected hands.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m afraid... It’s... my first time going out before such a large crowd of people.”

“I see, now that you’ve mentioned it.”

“Um... would it be possible to cancel the event by any chance?”

Shelfa’s cheeks were slightly covered in sweat despite that it was winter. She was completely worked up, and was frightened on top of that. She looked like her knees would give away at any moment.

“Hey... c’mere for a second.”

He pulled Shelfa, who was standing uptight like a doll, closer by the hand, brought over a chair, and sat her down in front of the luxurious stone fireplace.

“Today’s debut is something that will definitely benefit you. I’ve explained this to you multiple times before, right?”

“That’s... But, I’d still rather not.”

“I’ll be following along right by your side. I’ll be keeping up with your carriage on Kris, and I’ll never be too far apart from you.”

“You will, Rain?”

A little bit of vigor returned to her cheeks.

Shelfa squeezed Rain’s hand as if it was her lifeline and turned her clear blue eyes to him.

“Will you accompany me until the very end?”

“Yeah, ‘till the very end.”

“...Will you hold my hand as well?”

“No, I think that’d probably be pushing it.”

Rain smiled wryly and placed a hand upon Shelfa's head. He continued,

"but, I'll be right there, so you can look to me if it gets to be too much for you. Just like how you're staring at me now. Only if it helps you calm down, of course."

"It calms me to be by your side and look at you like this... My heart was racing furiously until just a moment ago, but now it has slowed down considerably."

Shelfa brought Rain's hand, which she had been grasping tightly, up to her chest.

*Whoa, it's soft... no, wait, that's not the point here.*

"Hmm... I guess the only difference is that I'll be a little farther away. Oh, and while we're at it, make sure you only do stuff like this when we're alone."

"Why is that?"

"For adult reasons."

He summed up his reasoning with that one line and said,

"anyways, you're feeling better now, right?"

"Please wait just a little longer. I feel like you're sharing your strength with me when I look at you like this..."

Shelfa stared at Rain with her large eyes open as wide as they could go, as if she was reluctant even to blink.

Her sincerity and purity did not hold even the slightest trace of doubt, and her heart seemed to calm down just by looking at Rain, just as she had claimed.

However, Rain, too, felt "something" from Shelfa.

He felt that her monochromatic blue eyes, characteristic of the nobility, were faintly emitting light. Just as she gained an unseen power from Rain, Rain, too, felt some kind of "surge of power" from the princess before him.

It was not simply his imagination, but rather as if something that had been slumbering within the deepest depths had abruptly reared its head.

If it had been some ordinary warrior who had been looking into her eyes... they would have likely felt some sort of power that caused them to inadvertently begin to tremble.

Rather than being affected by Shelfa's mysterious power, however, Rain felt awkward and ashamed by her eyes, which were filled with her wholehearted trust for him, and purposefully looked away.

"Shall we head out on our date now?"

"...Date?"

Shelfa, who had regained much of her cheer, tilted her head to the side.

"In other words, I'm saying that you should think about the matter from a perspective that's convenient to you, Little one. Forget about the mobs of people for now. Think of them like they're pumpkins or something. Just think that you're going on a date around the capital with me. You can just ignore the noise around you and pretend that we're the only people present."

"A date... with you, Rain?"

she said in an almost sacred tone, as if she was uttering the name of a god.

"Exactly. Just look at it that way. Or do you not want to go on a date with me?"

Shelfa shook her head so furiously no sooner than the words that left Rain's lips that Rain almost wanted to tell her that she didn't have to shake her head so hard.

"I... want to go on a date with you."

"Let's go on one someday. We can go whenever we want from now on. Press through today with that in mind."

Shelfa looked up at Rain with upturned eyes and a suddenly flushed face.

"Somehow, I don't feel afraid anymore."

"I see, that's great. ——Oh yeah, I'll give you this too."

Rain pulled out an aged silver coin from his pocket and pressed it into Shelfa's hand.



It had unrecognizable letters engraved close together on its surface and hole had been punched through it to allow a chain to pass through and turn it into a necklace.

“Here, this is genuinely the last one. Or rather, there was only two to begin with. You might not need it anymore, but I’ll give it to you just in case.”

“This is——”

Shelfa rose from her seat as if she was being pulled away and leapt into Rain’s chest after one look at the worn-out silver coin.

“Thank you so very much, Rain!”

“Whoa there.”

“I’m happy... so very happy... I’d been feeling uneasy about having used it ever since I did,”

Shelfa said with her arms wrapped tightly around Rain’s back.

Naturally, Rain had his arms around Shelfa’s back as well, and he wondered how a third wheel would see them if someone walked in on them. Well, many princesses were often married off in their teens, so it was entirely possible that the public might not view them in too strange of a light.

“...Here, I’ll put it on for you. Ah, would a shabby coin not go along well with your current stunning get up?”

“No, it’s alright. Please... put it on for me.”

She lifted her head up ever so slightly and patiently waited.

As she wished, Rain took the magic coin back from her and put it on her slender neck as she watched.

“There, that’ll do it. Put it under your clothes so it can’t be seen.”

“...Okay.”

Shelfa looked spellbound. She stared at the dingy coin that was placed around her

neck as if it was a treasure of priceless value (though, it certainly *was* expensive).

Rain began to worry that she had completely forgotten about the event that was soon to commence.

“Also, there’s actually still something else I wanted to talk about...”

Rain said, bringing up a topic that he had been putting off.

“Yes?”

“It’s about the guys who attacked you the other day —you know they haven’t given up or anything yet, right?”

“Yes.”

“...I don’t want to say anything that’ll make you too uneasy, but to be blunt, it’ll be easy to target you today... Or rather, if I was on the assassins’ side, I’d definitely target you today.”

Shelfa blinked.

“But you’ll be with me, Rain, won’t you?”

“I will, but... That’s not the point, I’m saying that I’m basically about to use you as bait. If I miss this chance, I won’t be able to round them up all at once.”

“But, when all things are said and done, all of this is for my sake, is it not?”

She smiled without a single complaint and continued,

“please don’t let this worry you. I entrust everything that I am, including my life, to your judgement, Rain... So please, do as you wish.”

Hmph... Rain almost groaned out loud. There was an infinite amount of trust held within Shelfa’s earnest eyes as she looked at him, which gave credit to her words.

“...Are you sure about saying something like that me? You might find yourself in a fix and regret it later.”

Instead of replying, Shelfa silently drew nearer and held him again.

“I can see the feelings that you’re hiding away, Rain. I won’t ever regret it.”

...There was nothing else he could say.



Preparations for the debut were already underway at the plaza just inside of the castle gates. The snow-white carriage, which was to be pulled by two white horses, was seated with a velvet sofa and lacked both a roof and windows.

It wasn’t very spacious, but that wasn’t a problem since Shelfa would be its only passenger. She would become the target of the people’s attention simply by sitting there, so a “debut” was the perfect name for the event.

Rain’s and Ralphus’ mixed unit, which was in charge of escorting her, had already begun to gather around, and the area was overflowing with noise. The soldiers were chatting about as they liked because no one of the captain rank had arrived yet, so there was no one to censure them for idle chatter.

Yuri and Selphie were no exception and were chatting with one another as a means to kill time. Actually, as squires, they should not have been able to participate in the debut, but Yuri was a squire under Leni’s, the general’s aide’s, charge and Selphie, though she had no official placement, was considered to be under Rain’s care in one way or another, so both girls had been given special permission to participate.

In any case, they had been outfitted with a white uniform with leather armor on top. The reason that they were not equipped with armor was because they were not full-fledged knights yet and thus were not allowed to wear formal armor.

Still, Selphie aside, Yuri was happy because it was “much better this way.”

To begin with, Yuri did not only see her participation in the event as a pain in the ass, but was rather indignant about it too because she felt that she had drawn “the short end of the stick.” From Yuri’s perspective, she would have much rather spent the day sleeping in her lodgings than attend the debut.

Yuri never stopped complaining between her messy bites into the bread, cheese, and wine the two of them had bought in the lieu of a proper breakfast.

Both girls were crouching in a corner and giving their undivided attention to appeasing their appetites, and they looked so unkept that their parents would have cried out loud if they had seen them. Though, this was a moot point since both girls had been orphaned long ago.

“Besides, it’s not like she’s a circus monkey or anything, so what’s all~ this about a “debut”? Honestly, all of the General’s plans are always so messed up!”

After complaining for a while about how she was called out for work so early in the morning, Yuri recapped all of her complaints and reached the above conclusion.

“Eh? I don’t think so. Isn’t Lord Rain doing his best for the Princess’ sake?”

“You think? I don’t really like publicity stunts like this. Wouldn’t it have been better to implement actual policies to rack up public support instead of holding a show like this?”

Selphie carefully chewed the food in her mouth before she refuted,

“I don’t think the publicity is all that bad. There’s a need to show the people that “things will be different from now on” before anything else. It’s only bad if you don’t change things in accordance to what you said you would. But, I think that the Princess does really intend to change things... And so does Lord Rain.”

Yuri frowned, unable to give an immediate response, and nibbled on her bread for the time being to buy time. *I tip my hat off to you, that was a pretty good point.* In a small burst of frustration, she decided to go in for the kill.

“——By the way, and I’m changing up the topic here, why do you call the General “Lord Rain”? Don’t tell me that it’s for some cliched reason like you fell for him or something?”

Selphie surrendered readily, to Yuri’s surprise. Her face immediately turned bright red and she began to write on the ground with her finger.

How could this be?! Yuri found herself exasperated.

“Look here. You’re the one who’ll suffer if you fall for someone like that. He’s incredibly capricious in temperament. Besides, if you take out the fact that he’s ridiculously strong, he’s just braggart and nothing else.”

“That’s not true at all!”

*What are you talking about?!* Selphie seemed to add on as she opened her light green eyes, the same color as Yuri’s, wide and gulped down her wine like a man. She had been mild-tempered and timid up until now, but she seemed to have been provoked into action.

“\*exhale\* Lord Rain looks so manly, he’s very perceptive, and——”

Her words cut off there.

“...And what?”

“And, isn’t he really kind?”

Selphie began to scribble on the ground again.

*Ah, she’s beyond help, this one,*

Yuri thought right off the bat. Then, she asked,

“Selphie, are you the type of person who falls in love easily by any chance?”

“I’m not!”

Selphie cried out as she sharply raised her head. Then, of all the things, she confessed,

“this is my first love, okay?! ——Wait, ahh!?”

After boldly asserting herself in a loud voice, she buried her head in her hands after realizing her blunder. She continued,

“ugh... I was planning on keeping that a secrett.”

“...That’s impossible for you, Selphie. I mean, it was written all over your face.”

Selphie blushed again after Yuri pointed this out, likely because she had already had an inkling of the issue herself, and drowned herself in wine. The event hadn’t even begun yet, and she was already completely buzzed.

*And she looks like some kind of well-to-do princess on the outside, too,*

Yuri thought as she looked up and braced herself.

“Selphie, watch out!”

“Huh? K, kyaa!”

Selphie yelped as a horse stuck out its long neck right beside her. She hugged her bag close and stood up in a panic.

Yuri, on the other hand, was not all that surprised because she had experienced this before. Instead, she sullenly muttered, “you again, Kris?”

“K, Kris?”

“Yep. General Rain’s horse. He lets him run free for some reason, and he has a big attitude for a horse. He comes over re~al quick whenever people are eating. It’s like he’s messing around with us.”

Selphie had stopped listening mid-way through Yuri’s explanation.

She had been captivated by how Kris was a size larger than normal horses and was such a fine white horse with an abundant mane.

“Such a beautiful horsey...”

Her voice was becoming dangerous.

“...I don’t really care, but give up on that “horsey.””

Yuri frowned.

However, Selphie took no notice of her and reached out for the horse’s mane, which looked enticing to the touch. Unfortunately, Kris shook his head and avoided her.

“Huh, what’s wrong? I want to pet you...”

“Isn’t it *that*? He’ll probably let you touch him if you give him something to eat. He’s probably saying, “I won’t let you pet me for free,””

Yuri explained with a hand on her hip as Selphie laughed at her antics.

“I’m sure that’s not it. But it’s too bad. Even if I wanted to give him something, I only have some bread. I don’t think horsies eat——”

*Munch munch*

Kris stole away the piece of bread that Selphie was waving around in her hand with astonishing speed. He raised his head (neck?) and gulped it down in just two bites. Afterwards, he listlessly waved his tail once and stared at Selphie... or at her bag of food, to be precise, from the corner of his eye.

Yuri pointed this behavior out in a dry voice,

“he’s saying, “won’t you hurry up and give me more, huh?!””

“Eh?!”

Selphie staggered, confused. She continued,

“Y, Yuri, you can talk to horses?! And I never knew that horses ate bread...”

“Of course not! Oh, I mean that I can’t talk to horses. The General talks to Kris pretty often, but don’t lump me together with him! It’s just that it’s easy to understand what he wants, that’s all.”

“Okay, and... what about eating bread?”

“That’s a mystery. I don’t know how, I think Kris is an omnivore. He doesn’t eat fodder, though.”

“He doesn’t eat fodder, even though he’s a horsey?”

Selphie asked while finally stroking Kris. “Apparently,” Yuri answered curtly.

“Whoaa, he’s kind of... cute!”

——*Just what about this conversation made you think he’s cute, huh?!*

Yuri quipped back silently. She acknowledged that Kris was large, pure white, and was

of a great breeding, but she didn't quite like the horse because he was rather cheeky. The horse eventually trotted away from Selphie's hands as Yuri watched on, exasperated.

Selphie then looked over to her for some reason, so Yuri helplessly explained Kris' actions.

"He's telling you to hand over more food instead of just petting him."

At Yuri's words, Selphie hastily pulled out cheese and pastries from her paper bag and offered it to the horse.

Kris devoured the food like a bottomless hole and soon enough, he had finished off everything that Selphie had on hand.

Not only that, but he had also drunk Selphie's wine.

When Selphie had poured her bottle of wine down Kris' throat to see if he would drink it, the horse had emptied the bottle. He had even neighed a little and was obviously in a good mood.

"You're so silly, Selphie. Why would you give him your entire breakfast?"

Yuri scolded.

Yuri herself had eaten her own breakfast at the same speed as Kris had in order to ensure that she would lose none of it to the horse. She continued,

"he'll abandon you soon enough, now that he's eaten his fill. That's just the kind of ill-natured horse he is."

Yuri huffily looked the other way while laughing scornfully. She couldn't put up with this any longer.

——And just then.

Kris turned to Yuri and stuck out his sturdy teeth the moment that the girl had turned around whinnied as if he was making fun of her.

Selphie was surprised because the timing had been so perfect. It could not have been



a mere coincidence.

When Selphie expressed her surprise by raising a hand to her lips, Kris met her gaze—and Selphie could declare with certainty that she wasn't simply seeing things— and winked.

"Y, Yuri!"

"What is it? He'll get mad at you if you yell."

"That's not it! Right now, he just w, winked at me! And he was sticking his teeth out at you too!"

"Huh?"

Selphie and Yuri, who had turned back around, stared hard at Kris and observed him.

However, unlike before, Kris was looking away with a distant look in his eyes.

It was as if he was saying, "I'm just an ordinary horse~."

*...It's like he's playing stupid,*

Selphie thought as Yuri shrugged.

"He's not doing anything?"

"No, but he really did earlier..."

"Argh, whatever. Isn't it fine as long as you get along with Kris? Look, it's the General and the Princess. It's time."

Just as Yuri said, the General, with his three aides in tow, was walking toward the carriage with the Princess.

They were bombarded by the stares of the knights who had gathered around, causing the Princess to falter in her steps. She stood frozen in place with her eyes cast down. Even Selphie could tell that she was nervous. She looked like she would curl up into a ball at any moment.

The aides followed after her like ladies-in-waiting and looked like they were trying to console her with words of encouragement. Nothing changed. Seeing this, General Rain himself stooped over and spoke to her. He spoke to her about two, no, three times. It appeared that his words were stupidly effective as the Princess, who looked like she was about to retreat back into the palace at once, looked up once more.

The General nodded at her with a smile, and the Princess began walking toward the carriage again.... While looking at the General the entire time.

He probably had not said anything too out of the ordinary. General Rain had probably said some simple words of encouragement like the aides had. Only, the General's words were probably special to the Princess... Selphie felt the same way, so it was easy for her to understand this.

Selphie's heart hurt.

*But I won't lose!* Selphie immediately regained her cheer. *I should still have a chance... I won't give up so easily!* she thought as she caught up to Yuri, who had gone on ahead.

She locked eyes with Kris when she turned to her side.

And she could swear.

She definitely, definitely had not been seeing things.

Kris had winked at her again.

Shelfa was rather composed at the moment, likely due to the effect that she had secretly named, "the Rain effect."

No matter what anyone else said, the state of her feelings changed greatly depending on whether Rain was close by or not.

A countless number of knights, who all looked the same according to Shelfa's standards, were staring absentmindedly at her for some reason. She was even able to smile back at them.

Her heart jumped in her chest when a loud cheer arose from them. She had no idea what was going on. Had she made some kind of blunder?

Then, Rain rebuked them in a voice that carried well.

“Hey, are you guys a bunch of pubescent brats?! Quit stirring up a fuss just because the Princess smiled at you! And stop with the staring, you’re staring way to hard!”

They reluctantly looked away. Though, there were still a few knights who glanced back at her every now and then.

Rain silently cast a cursory glance over his men. Something akin to an impalpable pressure was imbued within his gaze, and the impolite gazes eventually dropped away.

After confirming that all of the looking had stopped, Rain nimbly climbed atop of Kris. His line of sight rose to approach Shelfa’s, causing the princess to look more than a little relieved.

“Hello, Kris.”

She gently stroked Kris’ neck with a gloved hand. She had been talking to Kris rather often as of late, and had become able to read the horse’s expressions to a degree... He was in an exceptionally good mood this morning.

“Fall in line!”

Gazaram, who had recently come under Rain’s command, yelled in a raspy voice.

It hadn’t been very long since his arrival, but he already acted more like a captain than either Leni and Senoa did.

She had had the impression that he was only “a scary person...” when he was first introduced, but Shelfa’s evaluation of him had changed completely over the past several days.

One reason for this change was because Rain seemed to trust him deeply. Another was because Gazaram had surprisingly kind eyes.

This knight, who could be called elderly at this point, was similar to Rain in the sense that he was extremely friendly despite what his appearance may suggest (though

perhaps this was rude of her to say).

Besides, he never stared at her like Leni did, so Shelfa's feelings about him were on a one-way track toward favorability. She was sensitive to people's gazes because so many people ogled at her on a constant basis. People who stared at her about as much as Leni did only bothered her a little, but most of the scrutinizers looked at her with "distasteful eyes," further fostering her dislike of people.

Still, Gazaram didn't look at her like that, so Shelfa was quick to classify him into her 'good people' category. Once, when she had told Rain about her personal classification system, Rain had told her, "you shouldn't judge people so easily," but she found it difficult to forsake her habit of many years.

Gunther appeared while Shelfa was watching Gazaram give orders. He was technically also a captain, and he was accompanied by his men today, which was a rare occurrence.

Several of his men were mages wearing black robes, a sight that was worthy of the attention and awe that it garnered.

Those who could learn magic had become exceedingly rare ever since the Daemon War.

Contrary to countries like Zarmine that proactively gathered rune masters, mages were extremely valuable in Sunkwoll, a kingdom that was second-rate in terms of national power.

To begin with, the fact that there were civilian rune masters in military employ was a secret in and of itself.

Ignoring the inquisitive looks he was getting, Gunther motioned for his men to wait and approached Rain on horseback.

"Lord Rain, I have a report."

"Yeah, what's up?"

"...Pardon me."

Gunther whispered something in Rain's ear after casting a glance at his surroundings.

Did he have a secret to share with Rain?

Shelfa immediately switched her interests over from Gazaram to Gunther and, while she knew that she was being improper, held her breath and tried to listen in. Unfortunately, she could not hear anything. Still, she could tell that other people had also taken interest in Rain and Gunther by the way that their surroundings had suddenly become quiet.

Eventually, Rain, who had been listening to Gunther's report without a word, twitched his eyebrows. It was rare for Rain of all people, who was always calm in any situation, to express his surprise. Just what on earth could have happened?

"...Are you sure?"

Rain whispered back.

"Yes. My men have identified them. I'm having my men standing by watching them silently for now... How should I proceed?"

"Hm~mm... I see... They read through us."

Rain folded his arms while on top of Kris.

He looked over at Shelfa out of the corner of his eye while growling. He hastily looked away when she ardently looked back.... She was finally starting to feel uneasy.

Rain remained deep in thought for several minutes even as he was bathed in the curious attention of a large crowd of people including Shelfa.

Then, he suddenly slapped his thigh.

"I've got it. Gunther, lend me your ear."

This time, Rain whispered something into Gunther's ear.

Shelfa... and everyone else, were almost writhing with curiosity about what they were talking about.

Upon hearing what Rain had to say, Gunther abruptly raised his eyebrows.

Then, in his ever-calm voice he asked,

“have you made your decision?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. But laying down some groundwork beforehand is always the smarter option, no? Or are you opposed to it?”

“No,”

Gunther replied immediately,

“I believe it is a good idea.”

“I know, right? It’ll be difficult... but you can do it, right?”

“Please leave it to me.”

He swept back his mantle and bowed elegantly from atop his saddle. Then, Rain whispered into his ear again. This time, Shelfa caught a bit of the conversation.

*“And, if you’re successful, leave a scrap of paper behind. As for what to write on that piece of paper——”*

Gunther nodded and listened to his orders with a heavy scowl... Without moving a single eyebrow, he answered, “understood.”

“Alright. Then, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

With a low bow, Gunther took his mages, whom he had brought all the way here, and disappeared off to somewhere. He left not towards the castle gates, but toward the back of the castle.

“Rain... um, what were you talking about?”

“It’s better that you don’t know for now. You’ll know about it soon enough whether you want to or not.”

“Eh?!”

It had not been Shelfa who had interposed with an objection. It had been the girl

named Yuri, who had appeared nearby at some point.... Along with the girl Shelfa had seen before at the exam.

“This doesn’t even have anything to do with you! Quit trying to eavesdrop.”

“Buut...”

“Just hurry up and go back in line. Selphie, you too.”

“Ye, yessir! Lord Rain!”

Rain looked back at Selphie with ‘*what?*’ written cleanly across his face. However, Shelfa was even more surprised than he was. She stared at the other girl relentlessly.

*Her face is kind of red... This person... could she...?*

——Selphie’s face was red because of the wine she had downed earlier, but, nonetheless, Shelfa’s instincts were not wrong. Selphie noticed the princess’ gaze and the two locked eyes.

Both girls looked at the other with extremely mixed feelings.

“...? Well, it’s always a good thing to hold me in high esteem. Keep up the good work.”

Rain, the person at the heart of the issue, seemed to think little of it as he wrapped the issue up and yelled at the somewhat unsatisfied soldiers around them,

“hey! Straighten up! We’re gonna start a little early and head out right now! Gazaram, Leni, Senoa; are the three of you good to go?”

In the blink of an eye, Shelfa became unable to worry about the secret talk. The people around her were moving about in a hurry. They were running back to their respective captains, calling roll, and lining up in front of and behind the carriage as she watched.

The woman called Selphie and Rain’s secret talk with Gunther temporarily vanished from Shelfa’s mind. She no longer had the leeway to worry about them.

“Um, Rain? Lord Ralphus and his men aren’t here yet?”

“Yes, I asked him, Gwen, and the rest to go somewhere else. I originally wanted to go

myself, but it would be bad for me to leave your side, Princess.”

“That’s... I would be very troubled if you were not here.”

She wanted to know where “somewhere else” entailed, but Rain did not explain any further.

Well, that was fine.

Except, she was troubled that she had started to grow a little nervous again.

When she immediately turned to look at Rain, he leaned his upper body closer to her. Then, he whispered so that no one else could hear,

“c’mon, let’s go on our date.... Yeah?”

“Um, yes!”

And with that, she immediately felt better.

A small smile slipped out of her in self-exasperation.

The people around her were making up a noisy fuss again, but this time she paid them no heed.

*A date, a date with Rain...*

she repeated over and over in her heart like a spell.

*It’s all right, I’m not scared anymore.*

After all, Rain was right by her side.

*Yes. And, what even is there to be afraid of? As long as Rain is with me, I am the happiest girl in the world.*

“Is everyone lined up?! Alright, let’s march!”

At Rain’s command, the lines of soldiers in sparkling armor (although Rain alone was still in his usual black outfit) gracefully headed out the castle gates.





Once they had exited the castle gates, Shelfa found that the capital, Lydia, was in a completely different state than the town of her memories.

To begin with, Shelfa had spent most of her life so far in Galfort. She was such a sheltered princess that she could count the number of times that she had ever been outside the castle.

The town that she had seen several times before had been much less crowded and much more relaxed.

But today, the town looked like a scene from another world entirely.

People of all ages were crowding around the main street where the procession was to pass and were eagerly keeping an eye out for it... or rather, they were desperately keeping an eye out for a single girl in the middle of it. Children, adults, and even storekeepers who were ignoring their business had come out for the event.

*"Hey, stop pushing, I wanna see so stop trying to get in front of me, damnit!"*

The horde of people let loose their raw curiosity and searched for the princess' carriage the moment they caught a glimpse of the head of the procession. They were stirring up such a racket that the knights patrolling the streets were clicking their tongues at them.

But they couldn't be blamed for being curious.

They were excited to see Princess Shelfa, who had always lived as if she had been confined inside of the deepest depths of the castle. Even most senior knights did not know what she looked like. Which was to say nothing of the general public —many of whom did not even know the princess' name. Naturally, they had never seen her face either.

*"Well, there's no way that she'll be too easy on the eyes since her father was an ugly old man, but maybe she'll at least be a good topic for conversation..."*

Many of them were thinking similar thoughts as they waited on the stone-paved road.

However, the forbidden gates had opened.

Those who caught a glimpse of Shelfa realized that they had been completely off the mark and exclaimed, “*that’s* the late king’s daughter? You must be kidding me,” with their jaws dropping in shock.

A good portion of them were immediately silenced and tried to chase after the carriage in a hurry. Naturally, this was because they wanted another look at their princess.

*“I only got to see her profile before (because Shelfa had been looking at Rain)! I want to see her properly from the front. I want to hear her voice, too!”*

The people caused a lot of trouble for the unit of knights following after the carriage because they had to stop a good number of the women, and not only the men, from chasing after it. Rain had cunningly announced a large-scale tax cut right before this “debut.”

He had been steadily creating the groundwork for this occasion all the way up until today, but it could be said that his policies had only truly succeeded at this very moment.

On this day, many people embraced the sentiment that “Sunkwoll might actually change this time.” Many of the people who had seen Shelfa’s beauty had returned home to share their exciting stories of her with their neighbors and acquaintances, and many of them had also included that “she seemed very kind.” Many of their claims had been based on the tax reduction because, obviously, beauty did not necessarily equate to kindness.

*She was one heck of a beauty → Come to think of it, there was a large tax cut recently → I see, so Her Royal Highness the Princess is a very kind person.*

——Was how their reasoning went.

While it was undeniably true that Shelfa was a kind girl, it had actually been Rain who had proposed the tax cut and deregulation policies.

His sly and cunning calculations were steadily bearing fruit.

Shelfa had long since recovered from her initial surprise.

As curious as it was, she found that she was no longer perturbed by the cheering around her or the horde of people flooding the streets now that she had hypnotized herself by repeating, “this is a date,” and was keeping pace with Rain.

Rain, who alone was wearing his usual black garb instead of armor, was humming in a low voice next to the carriage that Shelfa was daintily sitting in. His upper body was gently rocking on top of Kris, and he was in a good mood.

His humming was extremely bad even to Shelfa’s, who was most partial to Rain, ears, and anyone else would have hated to hear it. However, Shelfa liked hearing Rain’s low voice, and it relaxed her to hear him hum.

Rain had told her that this debut would be dangerous, but Rain himself was a calm as he could ever be and didn’t look like he was even trying to be wary of his surroundings.

Still, Shelfa had every confidence that, *even if he’s that calm, Rain will still react faster than anyone if something happens.*

She had no basis for her claim, but there was not even the slightest shade of doubt in Shelfa’s trust in him.

Rain cast a glance at her after he had finished a song. Their eyes met. Shelfa beamed, and Rain smiled back.

Then, he looked behind over his shoulder.

“People won’t take Galfort Castle’s security seriously at this rate,”

he said.

Shelfa had initially wondered if he was worried about that, but he then smiled

complacently and muttered, “that’s some good timing,” contrary to her expectations. Whatever did he mean by that? Shelfa wanted to ask, but she missed her chance because there was a change in Rain’s expression.

The procession was about to exit the main street and enter a small plaza lined with rows of stores.

Anyone else would not have noticed. However, Shelfa, who was always watching Rain’s face, knew.

*Rain is wary of this plaza.*

There was something here that bothered Rain.

Shelfa leaned forward and observed the rather small plaza.

It was a circular plaza with nothing in particular to be suspicious of, and the town roads converged into it from all four cardinal directions. Shelfa’s procession was about to enter from one of these roads —the one from the north.

There were hardly any private houses in the plaza, and only the eaves of small stores lined its outer circumference. There were also several cart stalls that looked like wheeled wagons that were missing their horses. The carts were selling flowers or light beverages. They had likely assembled in anticipation of the spectators that would gather in the plaza.

Shelfa’s eyes did not find anything out of the ordinary. She thought that this was a scene that one could find anywhere. Although, she could not be too sure.

The knights escorting the carriage from the front also entered the plaza as if nothing was wrong. Shelfa herself was nearing it with every second.

Only, there was a bit of an unexpected event.

A child had attempted to cross the street and had fallen over right in front of Shelfa’s carriage. The procession stopped for a brief moment. The unit in front of the carriage had already passed the plaza by the time that a few knights had helped the child up and cleared the street.

The coachman hurried the horses in an attempt to catch up to them.

They entered the plaza.

And there, things came into motion.

*Clatter clatter clatter!*

When Shelfa turned around, surprised at a sudden noise, she found that several people had rammed the wagon-like carts into the procession's rear. The knights who were about to be run over cursed and dodged at the last moment. Then, for whatever reason, the people completely cut through the procession, cutting off the road they had entered the plaza from, and stopped moving.

People jumped out from within the carts' hoods...

Many, so many people donned in black robes...

Immediately afterwards, there was yet another loud crashing sound as the carts burst into flame. The flames spread quickly. They flared up in the blink of an eye and there was nothing that anyone could do about them.

*Crackle! Crackle!*

The noise continued.

The same thing happened to the other three roads that lead into the plaza, and not just the road that the procession had come through. The roads were blocked by furiously blazing carts. And a crowd, a horde, of people in black robes... Instead of attacking immediately, they waited until their comrades, who had driven the carts into the roads, gathered around them. Perhaps they intended to win the battle through sheer numbers.

On the other hand, Shelfa and the unit around her had been completely cut off from their allies. No matter which direction they looked to, the flames were so unusually fierce that they would not be able to count on getting reinforcements for a while yet.

“Argh~, crap!”

Yuri suddenly cried out, breaking out of a daze.

“If I knew this was gonna happen, I would’ve stayed in the row I was supposed to be in!”

she wailed as she clutched her head.

Then, she met Shelfa’s gaze and brought her hands up to her mouth with a look of guilty shock.

Shelfa was not particularly offended by Yuri’s words. Thus, she smiled and quietly looked the other way.

To begin with, she had always thought that it was wrong to expect others to risk themselves just to protect her.

Just a few months ago, she had been in a position where she had essentially been abandoned by everyone. She knew that there was no way that people’s hearts would easily change just because the circumstances had.

Rain had been the only exception. Rain had said that, “you can rely on me as much as you want.” While she was ecstatic about it, Shelfa also felt that she shouldn’t simply depend on him one-sidedly. She had to do something for him in return——

She saw something by her feet.

Shelfa immediately picked it up upon realizing that it was the hilt of a rapier. She did not know who had left it there, but she decided to use it anyway.

*It’s my first time using a sword, but I have to lessen the burden on everyone else at least a little!*

Her surroundings were already in complete chaos.

The few dozen knights who understood the situation they were in were running this way and that in confusion. There were only a few people who had realized that Shelfa was in danger.

They probably had not thought that things would have come to this even in their wildest dreams. Even an outsider could easily tell that they could not hide their discomposure.

The blonde Senoa had drawn her sword in a hurry and it had promptly slipped out of her hands.

“M, my family’s treasured sword!”

“More importantly, dodge!”

Leni pulled Senoa out of the way in a panic as the sword came tumbling down.

The first victim (of self-destruction) had just barely managed to evade injury.

While Senoa was a rather extreme example, the rest of the knights did not fair any better. Only Rain and Gazaram had been able to maintain their calm.

Rain’s attitude was particularly impressive. He had not stopped humming and had not so much as flinched in the face of the commotion, as if it was all just a gentle breeze.

He had not even reached for his sword yet and was simply looking on at his surroundings as if nothing was happening.

He was the very picture of composure, as if he was simply lounging about his own home, and did not show even a shred of alarm.

On his mouth was the fearless smile that Shelfa had become intimately familiar with.

Shelfa felt a wave of relief hit her as she watched him.

If she had been an ordinary knight instead of a princess... she would have definitely wanted to fight under his command.

She thought this even after taking in her partiality for him out of consideration.

Surely, Rain was someone who had been born with the qualities of a general.

It was strange to put it into words, but she was proud of herself for falling in love with someone like him.

Rain, the man in question, surveyed his men and rebuked them in an echoing voice, “this is unsightly, don’t falter!”

At his rebuke, the knights’ unrest quieted down at once. Even the enemy paused in their steps for a moment.

Rain gazed down over at his allies and continued,

“you guys are only allowed to falter if I become a corpse. So, there’s no reason for you to panic because there isn’t even a one in a hundred million chance of that happening! Form a circle around the Princess. Fight only the people who get close!”

Everyone began to move again at the sound of his voice.

The girl called Yuri complained, “one in a hundred million!? Who the heck even counts that high?” but she still obeyed in the end. Selphie, who was standing next to her, blushed again after watching Rain.

*Waah!*

The sound of someone crying reached Shelfa’s ears.

When she turned around to see who it was, she saw that the boy from earlier was running toward her, seeking refuge. Moved by his crying, Shelfa got down from the carriage and tried to run toward him, but——

“Please wait, Princess.”

She was stopped by Rain.

“Gazaram! Stop that brat!”

Rain ordered his aide on the other side of the carriage. Gazaram tightened his expression in response and blocked the boy’s path with a small nod.

Then, in a voice that suggested that he had just realized something, he roared,

“stop right there, son! I’ll take you down if you don’t. This isn’t an empty threat!”



Rain, too, got down off of Kris and stood next to him.

Then, he called out to the gloomy boy who was running all the faster now,

“hey, quit your ham acting. It won’t work on me. I’ll kill you without hesitation if you get any closer.”

The boy readily came to a halt with that.

He pulled out several knives from his back and dropped his center of gravity. His distraught visage, which he had worn up until now, had been wiped off clean.

“A, a boy that young?!”

The blonde Senoa wailed.

Shelfa was of the same opinion. He was only just a child!

The rest of the unit barring Rain circled around the princess. The few civilians who were in the plaza ran toward the corners, screaming. Shelfa could hear the bellows of allied units roaring from the other side of the blazing carts. However, there was nothing they else they could do.

The boy ignored all of that and focused his attention on only Rain and Shelfa. Eventually, his hate-filled gaze fixated on Rain alone.

“How... did you know? I’ve been trained to hide my bloodlust.”

“It’s impossible to hide it entirely anyway,”

Rain replied with a scornful smile. He continued,

“but it’s true that I hardly felt any from you. It’s just that I’d decided to beat up any idiot who tried to get close.”

When Shelfa looked up at him after getting off the carriage and cutting through a crowd of people, Rain was looking at the boy with an obvious touch of mockery.

“As I’d thought, you’re the biggest obstacle here...”

The boy... rather, the assassin from the guild glared at Rain with eyes filled with bloodlust. The knives that he held in both hands glistened as if they were wet. They were probably covered in some type of poison.

Rain had once told her that assassins used dirty methods like that.

She found it even more difficult to believe that this boy seemed to be used to doing this kind of “work.”

“If you’re gonna get in my way——”

the boy started with his voice dripping with resentment. He continued,

“I’ll kill you. Don’t get ahead of yourself... No one’s survived after making an enemy out of a skilled assassin. Rumors say that you’re pretty good, but you’d be better off if you didn’t think that you’re the best.”

“That’s hilarious, you stupid brat!”

Rain smiled brazenly, showing off his sparkling white teeth. His bold expression was filled with the intent to rub people the wrong way. He had yet to draw his magic sword, and his leisurely expression had yet to waver.

“You’re clearly mistaken,”

Rain said while narrowing his eyes. He continued,

“it’ll all end the same way no matter who comes at me as long as I’m here. There’s no one in this world who’s stronger than me. I’m the strongest in the world!”

——All of Rain’s allies, not to mention the enemy boy before him, were stunned into silence at his conceited words.... Except for Shelfa, that is.

Then, he added on for the boy who was at a loss for words,

“besides, you’ve already made a mistake. It’s over once an assassin has to resort to brute strength.”

“...It’s not like I wanted to use these stupid methods either. But there were certain circumstances this time. I don’t have the time to waste like this. Not that it matters to

you.”

A hint of distress was mixed into the boy’s words.

Then, he shook his head as if he was surprised at himself for showing his grievances. In a high-pitched voice, he continued,

“I’m not going to keep up our pointless conversation. It’s no use if you were trying to buy time!”

The boy suddenly flicked his hands after he had cut off the discussion.

At the same time, Rain extended his own hand out toward Shelfa’s chest.

Shelfa opened her eyes wide in surprise.

In Rain’s hands... nested in between each of his fingers in front of her chest were the four knives. The blades glistened as if they were wet. It took her a while before she realized, “Rain caught the knives mid-air.”

Shelfa had not seen a thing.

“Heh. It’s too bad that you noticed. Well, I already know all about those circumstances of yours, so it’s not like I had more to ask anyway.”

The boy frowned heavily at Rain’s words.

Then, Rain flicked his wrist, and in the very next moment, the boy bent over backwards.

Rain had disappeared from Shelfa’s side by the time that she had looked over at the boy. Rather, he had suddenly broken into a dash. He had reach his maximum velocity in just two or three strides.

*So fast!?*

Rain had suddenly vanished from right before her eyes just now as she had been about to thank him for protecting her... There was no way that Shelfa could *not* be surprised. She only understood that he had simply ran forward after she saw his black-clad back.

He drew his magic sword and swung it at the same time that he closed the distance between himself and the boy like the wind. From behind, Rain looked like he was about to run right off the road.

The boy evaded Rain's lightening-blue slash by leaping back. However, he was not able to evade it completely and a spray of blood droplets gushed out. He had suffered a minor wound.

While Shelfa had not seen it, Rain had thrown the knives back at the boy before dashing toward him. The boy had somehow managed to dodge the knives, but doing so had broken his stance, forcing him to spin around.

The boy's childish shirt was cut into pieces by the magic sword and blood visibly dribbled out of the wound. Behind him, a number of his comrades who had failed to dodge the knives fell over.

"Nngh!"

The boy's face twisted as he desperately avoided Rain's second blow. He was only able to escape the slash of death because of his comrades' sacrifice.

His slender body rolled into the crowd of his comrades. Then, in a hoarse voice, he called out,

"defeat him! As long as we kill him, we win!"

The boy's comrades finally attacked Rain all at once. Rain plowed through the flood of black robes in both directions, as if he was harvesting a rice paddy, and called out to his own allies,

"you guys stay there and defend with everything you've got! I'll take care of them on my own!"

Then, he disappeared into a whirlwind of blood.

Angry roars and distraught screams rose up from the carnage.

All of which belonged to the assassins.

Shelfa took a quiet breath.

She did not even consider the possibility that Rain could lose. She knew that there was no way that Rain would ever lose to people like them.

Still, she was frustrated at her own uselessness.

“W, we should also join the fight, Sir Leni!”

Senoa said once she had finally returned to her senses.

Like Shelfa, she had also felt a sense of responsibility after seeing the sword fighting unfold before her very eyes.

*“No.”*

Leni and Gazaram said in unison.

They looked at each other and shared a wry smile.

Then, Gazaram added,

“there’s no need. We’d actually just get in his way. We just need to clean up the ones who manage to slip through.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Gazaram glided out of formation and swept his sword sideways at a lone assassin who had managed to slip away from the fighting. The black robed figure twitched, stiffened up, and collapsed on the spot.

They finally saw just how experienced Gazaram was by the positioning of his hips and the way he carried himself when wielding his sword.

Shelfa and the others gulped, but Gazaram simply returned as if nothing out of the extraordinary had happened.

Then, he continued where he had left off,

“still, he was something to behold back then, too... but he’s gotten even stronger now. There really aren’t any limits to a genius’ ability. He’s something else.”

Shelfa instinctively stared hard at the old man's profile.

"What is it, Your Highness?"

"Um... Lord Gazaram, do you know about Rain's past?"

Gazaram told her that she needn't be so formal with a broad smile before answering,

"well... I suppose you could say that. I've crossed blades with him once. It was because we had both misunderstood something."

Leni exclaimed, "huuh?!" at his calm reply.

He was looking at Gazaram as if the latter had risen from the dead.

"So that kind of thing happened... I'm amazed that you survived after fighting the General."

"Nah. I actually agree with you. He defeated me like it was nothing. I'm only alive because I got lucky, hahaha!"

Gazaram threw out his chest as he laughed heartily.

*I must ask him to tell me about Rain's past sometime soon...* Shelfa firmly resolved herself.

Her resolution and the fact that Gazaram had called Rain a "genius" further increased her goodwill toward the aged warrior.

"Now, Your Highness, please fall back as far behind us as possible."

The sharpness returned to Gazaram's face once he had stopped laughing. He continued,

"a few more small fry got through."

When Shelfa looked over, she saw that a few more people had recklessly escaped from Rain and were heading for her again.

"Alright! Don't let your guards down! Go and earn your wage!"

Gazaram yelled in a reliable voice.

Everyone except for Senoa, who looked indignant, obeyed his orders and readied their swords.

Gazaram would make sure to look after Shelfa... Thanks to this reassurance, Rain was able to focus his full attention to exterminating the assassins.

To crush the enemy's head——

Rain thought that this was the most important point of interest in a war. This was the reason why he was making a beeline for the boy, who was most likely the enemy leader... But the enemy boy wasn't one to be taken lightly either, and just barely managed to escape to the back to the group.

He had hidden himself in the group of roughly fifty of his comrades.

However, Rain thought that it would only be a matter of time until he found the boy. No matter how many enemies there were, there was no way that he would get worn down first. It was his enemies who would become disadvantaged with the passage of time.

"Out of my way, damnit!"

Rain charged forward while brandishing his magic sword at the enemies blocking the path before him. They opened their eyes wide in surprise all at once. They had been surprised by Rain's impossibly fast speed.

Meanwhile, Rain had jumped at one assassin's chest and kicked the joints on his legs. Then, he pierced the man through the heart with his magic sword before he could even let out a cry of anguish.

Rain lightly threw the corpse with one hand at the other men who rushed at him. He leapt over their heads when they involuntarily caught the corpse and swung his magic sword around behind him as he landed. Ignoring the resulting spray of blood, he took on the other men who continued to come at him one after another.

There was a time when the teacher who had once taught Rain magic had commented

that he “saw the world differently from ordinary people” after witnessing him fight, and Rain certainly felt that way as well.

Sometimes, he had the impression that time flowed differently from him than the enemies that he fought.

From Rain’s perspective, most of his enemies looked like they were moving slowly, as if they were swimming through the air. It was a simple matter to dodge their attacks and attack back.

It was as if time moved normally only for Rain in a world where the flow of time had slowed down.

Every time a black enemy shadow ran toward him, there was a flash of blue light as their vitals were gouged out and they erupted in blood.

“Are you guys stupid?! Can’t you even judge your enemy’s strength?! I’m telling you to get out of my way!”

Rain roared dauntingly, but the assassins did not flinch. Or perhaps they had excited their nerves with drugs.

It was as if they were jumping at him only for the sake of getting killed.

Rain clicked his tongue and deftly evaded all of their attacks. He dodged their blades with a paper-thin amount of room to spare and readily countered with a single swing of his magic sword. None of his enemies were able to evade it, and more assassins fell to the side of the road each and every time this exchange occurred.

Rain’s right hand moved like blur, drawing multiple trails of light in the magic sword’s wake. Someone collapsed without exception every time the blue afterimages disappeared.

“U, uwoahhh!”

A man who was larger than his comrades rushed in swinging a sword that was appropriate for his gigantic frame when the assassins finally faltered. His eyes shone with a frantic light. To put it bluntly, he was probably touched in the head.

“You’re in the way!”



Rain charged at the man and passed by him with ferocious speed. A faint gust of wind sliced through the air.

The man roared and turned around immediately after they passed each other. He was planning to strike again because his first attempt had missed. But, a beat later, a sharp red line appeared across his forehead and burst into a slash of blood.

He slowly tilted backward with his face still frozen in rage and landed on the ground with a thud.

He had not even realized that he had suffered a fatal wound until the very end because Rain's attack had been too fast.

Seeing that, the other assassins cried out and broke their encirclement.

They had finally succumbed to the chills running down their spines.

At this point, they had finally begun to realize how reckless they had been to challenge Rain to a fight.

*"Don't be afraid! Just buy a little more time!"*

The boy's voice rang out from the back of the group as if he was responding to his allies' mood.

"So you say, but how 'bout you just come at me instead, yeah?!"

Rain vigorously roared back and he ran rampage without slowing down even the slightest bit from his initial speed.

He heard the incantation of a spell in response.

When he looked over while still swinging his sword, he saw three men chanting by the boy's side. Evidently, they had even prepared mages.

Their hands danced through the air as they chanted. All three of them moved in perfect

sync.

They were chanting the full incantation instead of shortening it. It was likely because spells were more powerful this way.

The spell was completed as the last assassin attacking Rain fell.

Still, Rain seemed unconcerned as he deliberately ran toward the boy. His tall frame was so fast that it buried the distance between them in a blink of an eye.

“Hurry!”

the boy wailed.

The mages were panicking as well. Their voices trembled in the end as they completed their trinity magic.

*“Cross Fire!”*

*Boom!*

Fire suddenly burst out and erupted like a bomb.

It was the result of the combined attack of the three mages’ spell. The writhing scarlet magical flames became as a giant whirlpool of fire that collided directly into Rain.

“Did you get him?!”

“Mo, most likely. It was a direct hit,”

the boy’s mage subordinate answered.

“Good job!”

the boy said in great delight while pressing down on the wound on his shoulder. He couldn’t see them, but he could hear people screaming from the other side of the explosive flames. It was likely the screams conveying the grief of the men who had lost their leader.

*Serves you right.*

——However.

Rain leapt out from the center of the explosion with the flames still coiling around his body.

“It’s no use!”

Rain dashed forward while swinging his sword after shouting that one line. His dark figure was covered in a rainbow-colored light. The flames coiled about him died out in front of the boy’s eyes. It was as if the source of the magic itself had been absorbed by something.

*No way... Is he really...? Wasn't that just a rumor?*

It was impossible, but the boy could think of no other explanation as for why the magic had not worked.

A sense of defeat spread across the boy’s face for the first time.

Then, one of his subordinate mages yelled,

“lies; that’s impossible! They can’t possibly exist!”

Rain hammered down a strike from above his head with extreme speed.

In no time, another horizontal blue afterglow flashed from a lower position. It was a beautiful, flowing slice without a shred of wasted movement. The last remaining mage sank into a sea of blood as his torso was lopped clean off of the rest of his body.

Rain’s black eyes captured the boy’s without a second glance at the fallen mages.

“Well, you’re the last one; what’s it gonna be?”

The boy gulped.

He had realized that all fifty of his subordinates had died and only the man who was in his way was standing before him.

The black-clad man with the ridiculous name, “Rain,” was not even a little out of breath after fighting all of those people

Rain simply held his magic sword loosely at ready with a silent expression on his face.

“Have you ever heard of this?”

He began talking all of a sudden. He continued,

“take this for example. Say there’s a wolf and a dog facing off close against each other? It’ll always be the dog that runs away. It’ll still all be the same if the dog was only barking at the wolf from a distance to begin with. The dog will always run somewhere where it’s scent can’t reach first the wolf before it barks.

This is because a normal dog will act on instinct. It instinctively understands that it can’t beat the wolf even before they start fighting. In comparison, humans are unfathomably stupid when it comes to things like that.”

The boy ground his molars together.

His wounded shoulder hurt.

*Stop fucking around!* he thought, but couldn’t refute. If he did, it would be the same thing as admitting that he and his comrades had raised their hands against someone they shouldn’t have ever touched.

Then, as if he was talking to himself, Rain continued,

“well, relax. Your other friends should be properly in Hades about now too.”

The boy finally found his voice.

“What... do you mean?”

“I mean that my colleague has probably destroyed your base by now. I don’t really like fighting defensive battles, you see.”

Rain lifted up his magic sword as he readily divulged this information.

He aimed its tip right at the boy’s nose and continued,

“so, what’s it gonna be? It’s a bit too late, but are you gonna surrender? Or——”

The boy suddenly broke into motion.

He ran in an unexpected direction in an attempt to escape Rain’s sword. He felt a gentle breeze whisk across his back, but somehow managed to evade Rain’s attack.

He was beyond any hope of salvation. He probably... didn’t have anywhere to return to, either. But he would at least complete the commission. It would be the last act of his pride. The boy earnestly ran forward with that one motive —one so twisted that normal people would never dream of it.

He had confidence in his speed.

He stepped over the bodies of his comrades as he headed for the group of people who had drawn their swords all at once. The princess... was behind the bearded middle-aged man! As long as he made it to her!

The boy leaped high into the air a few meters shy of the head of the group. They all looked up at him. But he was only aiming for the princess. He would go in for a mutual kill!

But then——

Somehow, he heard a voice directly behind him while he was still airborne say,

“as I’d thought, you’re even less than a dog...”

A moment later, something hit him hard across the back of his head and he plummeted down to the plaza floor, unconscious.



“Ugh~, that was pointless exercise,”

was the first thing that Rain said when he opened his mouth after twisting his body mid-air and landing like a cat.

The robed boy had fallen at his feet. Well, he probably wasn’t dead.

Shelfa was the first one to run over to him.

“Rain!”

She called out his name and began to pat down on his clothes and face with her small hands. She didn't care that her white gloves became dirtied by the assassin's blood on him.

“What is it?”

“Are you unhurt?”

Rain was about to say, “pshh, ‘course not,” but remembered that Gazaram and their others were nearby and said instead,

“not at all. I'm fine, there isn't even a scratch on me. I'll be able to drink good liqueur today too.”

“...Thank goodness.”

Shelfa placed a hand on the faint blossom of her chest and let out a sigh. Gazaram looked over at her and broke out into a smile before turning to the fallen assassins and said,

“you were something else, as usual... You really finished ‘em all off on your own.”

“Naturally.”

Rain closed the matter with a single word and circled around to inspect his men.

“Anyone get mixed up in the fight?”

“No sir, not at all. Everyone followed your orders to a tee and focused on defending.”

Gazaram rubbed his beard and flashed a grin.

Then, he quietly raised a fist.

Rain followed suit and lightly bumped his fist against Gazaram's.

Then, he saw two girls at the edge of the plaza. He gently touched both of Shelfa's arms before approaching them with long strides.

For some reason, Selphie was on all fours with her face to the ground and Yuri was rubbing her back.

"I heard that no one got hurt."

Looking troubled, Yuri replied,

"yeahh, no one's hurt. But Selphie here happened to cut one down... I mean, Selphie cut one down, sir. Long story short, this was her first time killing someone."

"\*sob\* Lord Rainn..."

Selphie cried, abruptly raising her head.

The area surrounding her mouth was covered with vomit.

Then, she suddenly clung to him and began to sob.

"Hey!"

Rain immediately tried to pry her away... but then he sighed and let her do as she pleased. His coat was becoming covered in puke, but it couldn't be helped.

"I, I~!"

"Um, it's okay. This's something that everybody goes through. Don't worry too much about it. You're in the right, I'll guarantee it. Besides, the Princess could've been in danger if you hadn't killed him. You were undisputedly in the right."

He tried to pacify her somehow.

Watching Rain struggle, Gazaram commented,

"must be tough for you too."

"Can it,"

Rain scowled.

In the next moment.

Rain felt someone's gaze on him. It was a gaze filled to the brim with hostility... no, with bloodlust.

"Who's there?!"

Rain pushed Selphie toward Gazaram and suddenly leapt several meters and landed on the roof of a store. He looked around at his surroundings. No one... he could not see anyone.

However, he knew that his prided senses weren't just for show. Someone had definitely been looking at him. At him... and also at Shelfa.

"...I guess things are about to get annoyingly complicated,"

Rain spat out in irritation before jumping down to where his comrades were waiting.

Oh well.

He would simply have to turn the tables on whoever came at him.



*-On the other hand, at Galfort Castle.-*

While Shelfa's procession was under attack, a tall and lean figure wrapped in a black mantle inconspicuously walked through the depths of the castle where the security had thinned out. Following behind him were several of his subordinates, who included mages in their number.





During the few times he was asked who he was, the other party was always satisfied once the black-clothed man identified himself.

However, there were still places the man could not go to even with his clearance. Naturally, the soldiers standing guard courteously blocked his path... but they readily allowed the man to pass once his mage subordinates stealthily chanted a few spells.

The mysterious group used similar methods to pass various groups of palace guards without raising a fuss until they descended down the dim and gloomy basement deep within the heart of the palace.

There was one single room on the bottom-most floor. Despite the occasion, there were two fully armed soldiers standing guard without even the slightest bit of movement.

They drew their swords and stood on guard the moment they saw the mysterious group approach.

“Who goes there?! Who authorized you to come here?! Name yourselves!”

In response, the slender-faced man quietly answered,

“I’m High General Rain’s subordinate, Gunther Valoa.”

“The High General’s...”

The two guards relaxed.

Unlike how it used to be, Rain was now known as the most trusted ally to the Sunkwoll royal family. Word on the street had even started to call him “Shelfa’s trump card.” It was difficult for the soldiers to *not* let their guards down.

However, Gunther moved like the wind during their brief moment of relief. He struck one soldier on the back of the neck with the side of his hand and then twisted his body around to elbow the other in the stomach. Both soldiers crumbled to the ground without a word.

His movements had been so skillful that even an accomplished warrior would have paled at the sight of them.

Both guards had likely failed to realize what had happened to them until the very end.

Despite having done something completely outrageous, Gunther showed no sign of remorse as he nodded at his men.

“I doubt that these two had the key anyway. Open the door.”

One of the mages silently stepped forward. He turned to the thick and heavy door. Then, Gunther wordlessly pointed at the two fallen guards.

Understanding his captain’s wishes, yet another mage crouched beside them.

There had been no interruptions as Gunther and his men silently completed their work. The two fallen guards were up and guarding the door as if nothing had happened within a few dozen minutes.

...Without ever realizing that their memories had been tampered by magic.

# CHAPTER 4

## UNINVITED RETURN

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### PART 1

*Bang bang bang!*

Selphie woke up to the sound of someone repeatedly hammering on her door. She was not a morning person to begin with, and she was in the worst of moods this morning.

It wasn't that she wasn't feeling well or anything —she just wasn't in a good mood. It was likely a lingering effect from yesterday when she had killed someone for the first time in her life.

"Selphie, something huge happened! Some. Thing. Huge! Hurry up and get out of bed already!"

"Argh~... I'm up~"

Even she thought that, 'ugh~, I sound so dead.' But it couldn't be helped. She really didn't have the energy today.

But Yuri, her newfound friend, wasn't one to hold back. Yuri slammed the door open and rudely entered Selphie's room before the latter had let her in.

"Aha! You're still sleeping! But today isn't a day where you can just lounge about as you please, Selphie. Something huge really just happened!"

As soon as the words left her mouth, Yuri roughly pulled off Selphie's covers while the latter was still trying to sleep. Selphie had not had the time to stop her.

"Kyah! Wh, what are you doingg?!"

Selphie instinctively hugged her chest and curled up in a ball.

“What do we have here?”

Yuri let out a snarky laugh dripping with hidden meaning. She continued,

“what’s this? You’re sleeping in your underwear even though it’s this cold? Well, aren’t you being sexy?... Minus points for the stripes though.”

“Please leave it be! I look like a child anyway!”

Selphie pulled back at her covers in a huff. Unfortunately, however, her opponent proved to be the stronger of the two.

“Like I was saying, don’t try to go back to sleep and wake up already.”

Selphie stubbornly pulled back at her covers at first, but she eventually gave up after realizing that she would never win and asked,

“so what happened, exactly?”

“Listen and behold,”

Yuri said before taking a deep breath as if she had been waiting for the moment,

“some high general named Safir, who was thought to have died in the previous battle, is apparently still alive! He apparently came back to the castle last night!”

“Eh?”

Selphie raised her voice.

She then immediately questioned timidly,

“...who is that again?”

“Oh, that was my reaction too!”

Yuri laughed brightly. She continued,

“I also thought, ‘who the heck is that?’ when I heard about it from the other squires. I mean, we commoners don’t really care about the names of the nobility and stuff like

that. Especially because I don't like a lot of them."

The prim and proper Selphie didn't readily agree with Yuri's bad-mouthing, but she completely agreed with the sentiment on the inside.

Even Selphie knew that there had been seven high generals including Rain prior to the last Zarmine War.

However, even Selphie, who had always wanted to become a knight, could only name about three~four of them at most.

They had just left that little of an impression on her... To put it bluntly, they had been the unpopular generals. Selphie had come to Galfort Castle upon hearing that Rain was recruiting new knights and thinking, 'I want to serve under him since he was originally a commoner!' but otherwise, she had been considering a career path as a government worker in another country.

The high generals of this kingdom were simply that lacking in both popularity and ability. Someone as talented and capable as Ralphus was the exception among exceptions.

Besides, there was a reason that Selphie disliked the high generals from the nobility on a personal level.

"Selphie?"

Her friend's voice brought her back to her senses.

"Oh, yes?"

"What's wrong; are you hungry?"

Selphie's shoulders slumped down.

Couldn't she had at least asked, "are you worried about something?" instead?

"No, not really. So, is there a problem that Mr. High General Who No One Really Cares About has returned?"

Selphie stood up and picked up some clothes to change into.

“Yeah, so about that...”

Yuri sat down on the edge of the bed with a plop and explained,

“that Safir idiot is apparently spreading rumors that he was entrusted with King Douglas’ will.”

“His will?”

“Yep. Well... It happened just yesterday, so it’s still only a rumor, but apparently it said that the King “entrusted all future affairs to his most faithful servant, Safir.””

*Huh, is that so?*

Selphie was about to give an off-handed reply as she did the buttons on her clothes, but...

Her hands stopped moving as she gradually digested Yuri’s words. She turned her head and stared at her friend with wide-open eyes.

“Isn’t that... pretty bad?”

“Yeah, it’s really bad, mmmm. If things go south the coronation today will all~ go to dust.”

“A, all~ going to dust... Th, that’s really, really bad!”

“That’s why I was saying that it was something huge from the beginning,”

Yuri said nonchalantly.

Then, after watching Selphie fluster about in amusement, she thought of something even more incredible and continued,

“plus, that Safir guy didn’t come empty handed—he apparently brought along a bunch of knights and soldiers with him. Safir’s already here, and his men are on their way to this castle right now. It’s been like we’re preparing for war or something all morning.”

“Eh, ehh!?”

All of the drowsiness that had remained in her body had been completely blown away. *Come to think of it, it's been pretty loud outside in the hallway... How did I sleep through all that without noticing...?*

Selphie grew disgusted at how carefree she had been. This wasn't the time to be moping about.

"But how did it come to this? Isn't he technically our ally?"

"He might be, but putting General Ralphus aside, there's no way that he considers General Rain as someone of the same rank as himself. 'Cause he's a noble while General Rain's a commoner. And, if the rumor about the will is true, Safir will basically be able to do as he pleases. He could even dismiss General Rain in a blink of an eye."

"Eh, eh?? That's not good at all!! That would really put me on the spot!"

she blurted out her honest feelings without realizing.

General Rain is dismissed → Selphie, his retainer, is also fired → Wandering on the road → Living in the night, with her body having lost its virtue.

The aforementioned diagram briefly ran its course through Selphie's head. She always ended up considering the worst outcome possible in times like this because she had experienced the setback of a life of poverty multiple times in the past.

Yuri should have also been in a similar situation, but her friend was as calm as ever.

Rather, Selphie felt that Yuri was having fun watching her panic.

"You're so calm about this... Ah, geez!"

She tried to do her buttons over and over again, but Selphie eventually gave up on a few of them because her fingers were shaking too much. Instead, she took out her frustration on her friend and said,

"is this really the time to be laughing?!"

"No, sorry. It was just too funny because you reacted just as I thought you would."

"It wasn't funny, it wasn't funny at! All!!"



Selphie retorted in a huff.

Yuri started to look a little more serious, possibly because she had reflected on her actions.

“Now, now. You don’t have to get so worked up. I doubt that that General of ours will obediently say, “oh, a will, is it? And I’m dismissed? Then there’s nothing I can do. I’ll go back to the countryside and become a fisherman or something,” do you? He doesn’t have the right personality for that.”

“...No, forget about the thing about fishing. But it’s the late king’s will, you know? Aren’t those usually absolute?”

“Hm~m. Selphie, you really don’t get him even though you’ve fallen for him. Listen up, alright? For starters, General Rain never gave the late king a second glance if he could help it. He’s not the type of person to care enough to follow something like the late king’s will.”

*Is that really so?*

The ever-serious Selphie was in heavy doubt. No matter how rebellious he was in spirit, as long as he was a knight, Rain should still be loyal to his liege’s orders. That was normal, Selphie thought, and was probably publicly considered to be common sense.

But, when Selphie voiced her thoughts, Yuri confidently declared,

“well, just you watch. You’ll get it soon enough.... It’s just...”

She furrowed her brows.

“It’s just what?”

“The problem is in how General Ralphus will take action,”

Yuri said somberly.



Shelfa was spacing out in her room as footsteps hurried about in the corridor outside.

Things had been progressing so quickly that she felt like she was watching a dream.

Last night, a lady-in-waiting had woken her up and Shelfa had been greeted by Safir, whom she had only met a handful of times previously, upon his return to the castle.

That had all been good and fine, but Shelfa had been rendered speechless after the lady-in-waiting had informed her about the existence of her late father's "written will."

According to the will, her father had apparently left all future matters in Safir's hands, but Shelfa had never heard about anything of the sort before and this was the first time she had even heard about the will to begin with. However, her father, who was always rather cold to her, would have never told her about it in advance anyway, so it wasn't that usual for her not to know of it. Safir had even showed her the written will in question, so he was probably telling the truth.

Putting that aside, Shelfa wondered if the coronation ceremony that had been planned for later in the day had been suspended due to the recent turn of events.

Shelfa actually welcomed the delay to her coronation; instead, she was worried about something else.

*I wonder what Lord Safir is planning to do?*

To get straight to the point, this was the gist of Shelfa's worries. She had no objections to stepping down from the seat of the throne. Actually, she would be more than happy to hand it over to him.

However, even Shelfa could tell that Safir and Rain were not on the best of terms, so Safir's attitude had the potential to become problematic.

She didn't even want to think about it, but——

Rain could even lose his title as general.

Even then, that was still better than the possibility that Rain could be banished from the castle, rendering him unable to stay by her side.

That was one possibility that she could never accept.

She had no power to speak of, but if that ever happened, she would do everything she could to change Safir's mind.

Shelfa firmly steeled herself.

Everyone had something that they could not accept no matter what. For Shelfa, this was none other than "a life without Rain."

"Oh boy~. They're all up and ready in position even though they had no orders to do so. Well, not that I don't know where they're coming from,"

Rain said in a low voice.

He had his back to Shelfa and was looking down at the castle's courtyard from the window. His steady back was perfectly composed and did not betray even the slightest sense of movement.

"Rain..."

Shelfa's voice trembled slightly as she called out to him.

Rain turned around, perhaps because he had noticed the anxiety in her voice. His expression softened a little as he moved closer to her.

"What's wrong; you don't look too good."

"Um..."

"What is it?"

"We'll still be together from now on, yes?"

she asked while staring hard into his black eyes. There was little point in asking, but

she knew that she would feel relieved, as if it would really happen if he put it into words, as long as Rain answered, “that goes without saying.”

“...I keep my promises. And I promised that I’d stay by your side after the war ended, didn’t I? I’ll stay by your side as long as our promise doesn’t become a nuisance to you.”

“Something like that will never happen!”

“——! You surprised me. Don’t shout all of a sudden like that, it’s not like you.”

A wry smile formed on his virile face. He continued,

“then, there’s nothing to worry about. Just leave everything to me. But, a turbulent life might await you if you do. I don’t mean to threaten you or anything, but you’d best prepare for that. Also, depending on the situation... no, well, I don’t think this is very likely to happen, but... anyways, depending on the situation, you might not be able to live as a princess anymore. Is that still okay with you?”

“Oh, that.”

Shelfa felt all of her anxiety vanish at once as relief washed over her. She continued,

“I’m so relieved. As long as you’re by my side, Rain, I don’t wish for anything else.”

“That so?”

Rain said with a hint of laughter as he began to play with Shelfa’s blonde hair with his large hands. He continued,

“that aside, I’m more worried about the guys who were after you than I am about Safir.”

Rain returned to the window with Shelfa following close behind. He bitterly looked down at his men who were running about the courtyard for no actual reason.

“Are you talking about the assassins from yesterday?”

“No, it seems that their circumstances were different from what I’d thought it was.”

“What did you think it was, Rain?”

Shelfa gently wrapped her arm about Rain and drew closer. Rain threw a quick glance at her but didn't reprimand her either, so she took the opportunity to stick even closer to him.

Still looking outside, Rain began to speak.

"Actually, I knew that Safir was coming from Gunther's reports. I thought that he might be the one targeting you because the timing of his arrival was too perfect."

"He's... targeting me?"

"I thought that he might try to get rid of you to take over the throne. We~ll, he might still be aiming to be king anyway. Still. Last night, after interrogating the brat we caught yesterday, I started to think that something was off..."

Rain said as he shook his head and began the tale of the boy's interrogation last night.

The boy who appeared to be the leader of the assassin's offensive unit had not become a corpse as Rain had feared, but had been surprisingly docile when Rain checked up on him.

A sarcastic smile had arisen on his face upon seeing Rain open the heavy doors into the dungeon. He looked as if he had become freed from his past, or as if he had seen the fate that was in store for him.

"I thought you'd come see me soon enough,"

the boy spoke up first.

He sat up from the thin bed he had been lying on and stared at Rain. His eyes were completely empty. They were the eyes of someone who had lost all hope.

"Heh. Pretty nice attitude you have there. Are you willing to answer my questions then?"

Rain asked, still standing.

"...You wanna know who the client is, right?"

“Bullseye.”

“Let me tell you this first. You’re making a misunderstanding something here. I just got this intel myself, but... you’re probably thinking that Safir, who’ll be arriving soon, is the client, aren’t you?”

“You’re right. As expected of an assassin guild, intel travels fast. But I’ve given up on the “Safir’s The Mastermind Theory.””

The boy raised his brows at this, so Rain continued,

“my comrades——Ralphus’ unit, to be precise, anyway, I told you earlier in the day that they raided your base, right?”

“...And?”

The boy, finally interested, pressed Rain for more information.

Rain readily showed the boys his cards.

“Your guild had already been wiped out by the time Ralphus got there. Someone... no, it probably wasn’t just one person, a group of skilled people probably killed off all of the remaining assassins. Ralphus was beaten to the punch.”

He silently observed the boy after speaking.

Then, after watching the boy’s face for a while, Rain nodded and said,

“like I’d thought, you don’t look too surprised. Which means you have an idea about who raided your base.”

He paused for a moment and bluntly asked,

“is you client Zarmine, by any chance?”

“...What do you think?”

the boy asked back with a cunning gleam in his eyes that did not befit his age.

“Let’s see... Just like you said earlier, Safir doesn’t have the guts to destroy your guild.

Besides, he doesn't have any subordinates who are skilled enough to do so. Which leaves Zarmine... but they're probably not your client either."

"What makes you think that?"

"King Leygur already knows that you guys are no match for me. I doubt that he'd use an assassin's guild this late in the game. And it's a given that I'd get in the way of anyone who target's the Princess."

Rain said his piece and leaned back against the cold stone wall. He crossed his arms and looked at the boy in the eyes before continuing,

"so how about you 'fess up already? Who... or which organization is your client?"

"I don't feel like telling you everything,"

the boy said rather curtly.

He stole a glance at Rain and continued after confirming that he wasn't getting angry.

"But, there's still something that doesn't sit too well with me either. So I'll give you a bit of a hint. ——Our organization was threatened."

"Threatened? You guys were still an assassin's guild, albeit one on the smaller side."

"Exactly. As stupid as it sounds, it's the truth. "Kill Princess Shelfa. You'll receive a handsome sum if you succeed, but you'll be annihilated if you refuse," they said. We laughed away the messenger of course, but the fact remains that several senior members of the guild died one after another a few days later. They were all highly skilled, but they were killed almost without resistance. They couldn't touch us while we were still inside of the guild, but people were killed the moment they went outside."

The boy drew a line across his throat with his hand.

"Some people had their throats slit open like this, and others were cut down by a sword. Our guild leader tried to pretend that everything was okay, but he finally caved after several members of the top brass died. "Kill her as quickly as possible!" he said, so we had no choice but to take the commission. And this is the result,"

the boy said regretfully with his face twisted in frustration.

Rain waited in silence, but the boy would say no more. Then, Rain voiced his doubts, “there’s one fatal contradiction in what you’ve said just now. Why wouldn’t those guys... I’m just calling them those guys for now, assuming that they do exist, why wouldn’t they act on their own if they’re so amazingly strong? If they had confidence in their abilities, they could have just come at me themselves.”

“They apparently said that “they didn’t want to come out in public” or something. Publicly, they wanted to say that our guild received a commission and killed the princess for some regular client.”

“Hmm~m. Well aren’t they annoying? And you don’t have any intent on revealing their identity. It can’t be that you guys don’t know who they are either, do you?”

“...But we have more information than you do.”

The boy grew serious and his eyes betrayed how displeased he was, but he closed his mouth before saying anything. After a while, his face returned to his original irritating expression and he said,

“I won’t bite. Figure out the rest by yourself. Though I doubt that it’ll be that easy to figure out their identity.”

Then, he began to laugh in a hollow voice and said,

“they’re strong, you know. Then again, you’re also undoubtedly a monster. You monsters should just finish each other off... hehehe... hahaha... gah!”

The boy started choking mid-laughter.

By the time Rain jumped to his aid, a strange noise had sounded from his throat as he coughed out a clot of blood and his eyes rolled back.

Rain did not know exactly how, but the boy had probably prepared poison or something in his mouth beforehand.

He felt the boy’s wrist, but could not find a pulse.



“...I wonder why they’re always so eager to die...”

he whispered after closing the boy’s eyes.

Come to think of it, the boy had never given his name. He was probably a pure-bred assassin who had been raised and trained in the guild since infancy...

Rain shook his head and left the dungeons after one last look at the boy sprawled out on his side.

“And that’s what happened. In other words, if we believe the brat’s words, these “somebodies” did away with the guild because they didn’t want others to figure out their identity,”

Rain finished his long tale while still looking down from the window.

Shelfa steeled herself and nodded.

She did not want to disappoint Rain by being fainthearted.

Then, as if he was rewarding her resolve, Rain wrapped an arm around Shelfa’s waist and hugged her tight.

“Don’t let it get to you. I only told you about this because I thought that it was only right that you know, since it concerns you. If someone comes for you again, I’ll be right here.”

“Thank you very much,”

she said, grateful from the bottom of her heart.

If Rain had not been there with her... she probably would have died a long time ago.

“Anyway. I’ll be continuing to be your bodyguard for a while. I’ll try to be by your side as much as possible.”

“Um, yes!”

“Hey, don’t say that so happily.”

Rain tapped down on Shelfa’s head with a fist. It was a tap so gentle that he might as well have pat her instead, prompting Shelfa to joyfully reply, “I’m sorry.” Despite the content of her words, the light spring in her cheerful voice betrayed her real feelings.

She knew it was imprudent of her, but she honestly did not mind being targeted by people if it meant that she could always be with Rain.

Still resting against Rain, Shelfa gently closed her eyes.

Then, someone knocked.

“Who is it?”

Rain called out before Shelfa could.

“It’s me.”

“Oh, it’s you.”

Rain gently freed himself from Shelfa’s arms and opened the door.

Standing on the other side was Gunther, whom Shelfa had gotten used to seeing, with his usual sullen visage. He nodded briefly at Shelfa before bowing deeply before Rain.

Most people would think that he was being rude, but Shelfa thought otherwise. Shelfa had come to a conclusion regarding the morose man after having watched him for a while.

The man called Gunther Valoa was a highly conscientious and proud person. Thus, he refused to easily lower his head to anyone other than his own master, Rain.

Ironically enough, the taciturn and obstinate man’s actions only served to increase Shelfa’s trust in him. Though, of course, the fact that he was Rain’s “right-hand man” played the biggest factor in her evaluation of him.

In any case, Gunter turned to Rain, his one and only master, and began his report as always.

“All of our preparations are underway. The rest is up to your discretion, Lord Rain.”

“Hm~m...”

Rain replied casually as he brushed back his black hair. He continued,

“I think it’s more up to our opponent’s discretion than mine...”

Then, a lady-in-waiting dressed in a maid outfit came up to the door and stopped before Shelfa and the others.

“Your Highness, do you have a moment of time?”

“Yes?”

“Lord Safir wishes for you to come see him in the audience chamber... And...”

she timidly looked up at Rain and continued,

“he has called for General Rain as well.”

“Me too?”

Rain scowled magnificently as the lady-in-waiting gave him a low bow. He continued,

“since when did that idiot become important enough to call for people like that? I’ll beat him up good when we’re done. And who does he think he is to use the audience chamber as he pleases?”

“My report is a step too late, but,”

Gunther interrupted,

“Safir’s car has just arrived. I believe that he has timed his arrival on purpose.”

“Heh, it finally starts.”

A fearless smile formed on Rain’s face.

The lady-in-waiting had brought a hand up to her lips when Gunther called Safir

without his proper title, but no one, including Shelfa, paid her any attention.

“I see. That means my bad hunch will probably come true. Man, it’s a good thing we laid out our groundwork in advance.”

“By your will.”

“Um...”

This time, it was Shelfa who interrupted, unable to hold it in any longer. After she spoke, she remembered the lady-in-waiting, who was also piping with curiosity, and said, “I’ll be there soon.”

Reluctantly, the lady-in-waiting did a right about-face and left. Then, Shelfa started again,

“Um, I believe I asked you yesterday as well, but... What are you talking about?”

Rain help up a hand as if he was telling her to wait a moment and gave orders to Gunther first.

“Alright. I’ll give you some kind of signal if anything happens. Though it’d be best that nothing does. And I’ll trust you to explain everything to everyone.... Let them act on their own decisions if possible.”

“Understood,”

Gunther replied curtly before bowing again. Shelfa got the feeling that something was about to happen, but she did not have a clue as to what that could be.

“You look like you have no idea what’s going on.”

Rain placed a hand on Shelfa’s shoulder. He continued,

“you’ll understand soon enough. In any case, why don’t we go and see what that idiot Safir has to say?”

Rain showed off his white teeth as he flashed a grin.



Rain and Shelfa saw Ralphus walking ahead with his back turned toward them when they turned the corridor on their way to the audience chamber.

Rain immediately called out to him.

Ralphus turned around and smiled a pleasing smile upon recognizing them. He gave Shelfa a polite bow and nodded lightly at Rain. His behavior was the exact opposite of what Gunther's had been earlier.

"What's this, have you been called down too?"

"Yep. Though I have no idea what about."

Ralphus' pleasant smile quickly disappeared and he looked at Rain anxiously instead.

"That's fine and all, I suppose... I've left my men on standby, just as you've wished. You're not seriously thinking of doing something ridiculous, are you?"

"What do you mean, something ridiculous?"

Rain fell in step with Ralphus and grinned.

He looked at his friend out of the corner of his eye and continued,

"and besides. Even if I did end up doing something ridiculous, you're not the kind of person to simply take advantage of that, right?"

"Yeah. I didn't ask for the details on purpose, because I knew that you would never be mistaken about me regarding that point... But do try to keep your tempter in check. If anything happens, I plan on raising a protest against Safir as well."

"——So, in other words..."

Rain raised a hand in acknowledgement as guards from the other end of the hall saluted them and curled up the ends of his lips. He continued,

"that means you're thinking something along the lines of this, too: "Safir might try to use the will as a shield to get something done." That's why you quietly agreed to my

seemingly ridiculous request, no?"

"...I believe it's possible that he will, unfortunately,"

Ralphus readily agreed as he knit his elegant brows. *Lord Ralphus is worried about the same thing*, thought Shelfa.

Before she realized what she was doing, Shelfa interrupted the two with a determined voice.

"In that case, I too will protest against Sir Safir when the time comes!"

The two high generals exchanged looks and smiled.

Then, Rain gently replied,

"well, the fastest way to find out what he's thinking is to ask the man himself... But still, thank you. We appreciate your feelings. ——And huh, there's a bit of a fight going on."

It was exactly as Rain had said.

It was taking place up the stairs in a hallway without a lot of people. They could see the large doors to the audience chamber right before them, but there were four guards standing in front of it instead of the usual two, and they were divided up into two groups of two and arguing against each other.

"...Two of them look like they're Safir's subordinates. As for the other two... I don't know them, so they're probably yours. Besides, your troops were on guard duty today,"

Ralphus deduced.

"Lessee~"

Rain squinted and continued,

"Yeah, I recognize their faces. Hey!"

He walked straight up into the middle of the fight and said,

“what’s going on here? Why are there four of you here today?”

“——Oh.”

The two guards that Rain “recognized” became visibly relieved.

One of them, who had a bit of a baby face, angrily rattled on,

“while we were guarding this area, Lord Safir brought a large group of people over out of nowhere and pushed their way inside. And not only that, but these two here——”

he pointed at the other two guards,

“said that *they* were going to guard the area starting from today. They said that us commoners were unnecessary here.”

The youth’s voice wavered in fury, hinting that his humiliation went beyond what he had already described.

He looked at Rain directly in the eyes and bit down on his lips.

Finally, Shelfa realized that one of his cheeks were a little red.

“My deepest apologies, sir. We tried to stop Lord Safir and his entourage, but...”

Both the guard and his partner lowered their heads.

Shelfa felt dark clouds forming in her heart. Without a doubt, Sir Safir had——

“Don’t sweat it.”

Rain slapped the youth across his shoulders and continued,

“he’s a high general like me and all. There was the possibility that he would cut you down, and we can’t have that, so it couldn’t be helped. Actually, I should be praising you for trying to stop that idiot even after he hit you. Good job! Er, you’re Miran, right? You were on guard duty here today, I see.”

“Ye, yessir!”

The youth called Miran smiled broadly and looked extremely happy for some reason.

“Alright. That’s enough for today. Go to the courtyard. That’s where everyone is.”

“Huh? I mean, yessir!”

Miran looked like he was about to ask a question, but then he changed his mind and bowed instead. His partner followed suit. Rain, in turn, returned the salute in a more serious fashion than he normally did.

Once Rain’s loyal guards had left, Ralphus suddenly turned to the other two guards that remained.

“I won’t repeat myself. Leave!”

He spoke in a stern voice that left no possibility that it was a jest. His voice held a kind of tone that caused listeners to instinctively straighten up.

Shelfa stared at Ralphus’ face in a bit of a shock. She had only ever seen him smile gently until now, so the change surprised her.

And, more importantly, Ralphus’ words were extraordinarily effective on the two guards.

They had been sneering at Rain and Miran until then, but now the color was visibly draining from their faces. They seemed to have been taken completely by surprise. It was possible that they hadn’t expected to be rebuked by Ralphus because there existed an abnormally strong sense of camaraderie amongst the nobility.

One of the guards attempted to mumble vehemently,

“How, however, we were...”

“Weren’t you two listening?”

For once, Ralphus had cut someone off before they could give their excuses.

Speaking of which, this was also the first time that Shelfa had ever heard him take such



a casual tone with someone who wasn't either his friend or his comrade.

"I said I wouldn't repeat myself. There's no point in wasting your words if you plan on protesting any further. I'll personally be your opponent, right here, right now."

He was neither getting worked up nor putting on an act of arrogance, but had simply made the suggestion with a relaxed attitude.

However, the two guards peered deep into Ralphus' azure eyes and broke out into a sweat after feeling "something" in their depths.

They understood that he was completely serious.

They immediately made themselves scarce without uttering another question or thought. They had left so swiftly that it left their onlookers dumbfounded.

Rain watched the whole thing unfold with a grin on his face and said,

"damn, get a load of this. I'm gonna call you over whenever I wanna chase away people I don't like. I think it'd be faster than punching them away."

"Stop teasing me."

Ralphus had promptly returned to his usual gentle smile. It was his face that he usually wore when he was with Rain that Shelfa had become used to seeing.

*Still, I can see why the ladies-in-waiting are always making gossip about him.*

Shelfa was impressed, as if the issue had absolutely nothing to do with her.

She thought that it was only natural that he was popular with members of the opposite sex, excluding herself.

"Now then. Shall we go and have our audience with our idiot Safir?"

Rain placed his hands on the double doors that were twice his size in height. "Be careful," Ralphus warned, and the three of them stepped inside.

## PART 2

The ceiling of the audience chamber was supported by multiple columns made of white stone and the entire floor was made of black marble.

The center part of the back wall was turned into a multi-layered platform, and seated on it was a tall throne. The floor between the throne and the entrance that Shelfa and the others had come in through was covered by a crimson carpet that was wide enough for two people to walk across side-by-side.

Normally, military officers were placed to the right facing the throne. Civil officers were placed on the left, and each officer would line up in accordance to their court rank——

However, this was changed up completely today.

Gathered closely around the throne were nobles whom even Shelfa was not familiar with.

Shelfa thought that they looked like they were protecting Safir as he sat on the throne, and Rain was likely of a similar opinion because he cursed under his breath. Ralphus kept a straight face for the most part, but she felt that he was enraged on the inside.

Safir, the main problem, was seated on the over-embellished golden throne with his nose upturned in a show of haughty arrogance.

He was dressed in white ceremonial robes, had curly blond hair, and he wasn't unattractive either... but Shelfa didn't like him very much because his eyes were always clouded over as if he was scheming something.

She disliked him a little less than Ganoa, the former high general, but that was about it.

To begin with, Shelfa had generally confined herself to just one room of the palace, so she had not met Safir enough times to grow to hate him.

However, she had absolute confidence that he would be on her 'people I hate' list if she had met him multiple times.

Safir looked haughtily down at Rain with eyes that looked drunken with a sense of victory and said,

“pft. Well done in coming here, is what I’d like to say, but I don’t have much to say to you. Actually, I only have one thing to tell you.”

Safir could not contain the smug happiness in his voice.

His followers snickered on the side.

Then, after pausing a beat for dramatic effect, he continued,

“your role here is over, go off and disappear to wherever you please. I feel like even the very air itself has become cleaner now that I think of how the castle will be cleared of the stench of common folk. Oh, and this obviously needn’t even be said, but you will hand over all of the troops that you command. *My* troops will be in charge from now on.”



Shelfa felt as if the earth had begun to shake from under her.

Until now, that “Sir Safir might banish Rain” had been on her mind. It had been on her mind, but never in her wildest dreams had she thought that the matter would come up as abruptly as it had.

For a moment, a violent fury overcame her as she was stunned into silence. For the first time in her life, Shelfa was about to raise her voice against someone——

But then, Rain said in his usual tone,

“If I may?”

“What’s this, I’ll not listen to you complain.”

Rain smiled and said, “I wasn’t about to,” as he waved his hand and continued,

“you see, I’ve always thought that you were a bit of an idiot, but now I see that you’re an even more of an idiot than I’d thought you were.”

The audience chamber fell into silence.

Safir’s expression fell flat and he gradually began to turn red.

In a hoarse voice he whispered,

“...what did you say?”

“I mean, c’mon.”

Rain, on the other hand, looked completely unaffected. He continued,

“there’s no way I’ll just stand here and do what you say, is there? It’s not like I’ve ever had any actual interaction with you. So just how did you decide to propose such a stupid idea without even getting to know to me to any extent first?”

Safir glared at Rain with his face as red as a ripe persimmon, but then suppressed his rage by the hair upon looking at Shelfa.

“...Your Highness. Please come here first. For this is where your seat is. Staying with

one such as him will dirty your noble being.”

He pointed next to himself. There was a small seat that had been prepared in advance. It had apparently been prepared specifically for Shelfa’s use.

Before she could flatly refuse him, Rain whispered in her ear,

“go. It kinda pisses me off that he’s looking down at you. That throne he’s sitting on is technically supposed to belong to you.”

“...If you say so, Rain,”

Shelfa reluctantly whispered back before tottering over and sitting down on the chair that had been prepared next to the throne. Safir recovered his bearings and said, “good morning, Your Highness,” but Shelfa obstinately remained facing forward and only returned the barest minimum of a greeting. What Safir had said just before had dropped her evaluation of him quite heavily.

“Now... then.”

Safir returned his gaze to Rain, completely oblivious to the fact that Shelfa quite disliked him. He continued,

“it appears that you have not heard the news from Her Highness yet. Listen well, for I have received His Late Majesty’s—”

“Yeah, hold it right there,”

Rain cut him off completely,

“I already know. I ignored you last night ‘cause I didn’t wanna see your face, but I heard everything from the Princess and Ralphus afterwards. You have his written will, yeah?”

“E, exactly. I see that you already knew.”

“...But is it even real? Let us see it for a bit.”

“Hmph. Did you think that it would trouble me if you said that?”

Safir stuck out his hand to the crowd of people behind him with a look of composure and received a scroll of paper from one of them.

He untied the sash sealing the scroll closed with grandiose gestures and unraveled it for all to see.

Written on the paper was a messy scrawl of deep black letters, and while it was rather difficult to sum it up in one sentence, the basic gist of the writing said, “I entrust all future matters to my most faithful servant, Safir.”

“Hmm~m,” Rain voiced as if he wasn’t concerned at all, though he did verify with Shelfa,

“Princess, how is it? Is there no doubt that this is King Douglas’ penmanship?”

Shelfa studied the piece of parchment that Safir was holding up with his head held high from end to end and unenthusiastically replied,

“...certainly, it does appear to be my father’s writing. However, I cannot be too sure because I am not very familiar with his penmanship.”

“Wha, what are you saying?! This is most certainly, without a doubt, His Majesty’s penmanship! There are plenty of others who will attest to this, even if you cannot, Your Highness!”

“Hey, quit yelling at the Princess,”

Rain abruptly interrupted again. He continued,

“or are you panicking so much because the will’s a fake or some other joke like that?”

“Bah!”

Safir, who’s face had turned yet another interesting color, was about to rush along into another long rant. This time, Ralphus, who had remained silent until then, took a step forward and said,

“Safir. Let us put aside the veracity of the will for the time being. There is something I

would like to ask you first.”

“Oh, Sir Ralphus! Naturally, I’d be more than happy to listen to what you have to say!”

“...Then allow me to ask. The reason that you are sitting on that throne is because you intend on taking on its power and authority as the ruler of this kingdom... can I interpret it as thus?”

“Sir Ralphus.”

Safir showed Ralphus proper courtesy. With mock grief embedded in his voice, he carefully continued,

“I am all too aware of my own powerlessness. However, His Majesty deemed to entrust me with his will before riding off to war. Thus, it is my duty to set aside my weakness and be strong for the kingdom. It needn’t be said that I’d like for you to continue working as a high general as you always have. I do not intend to be crude with you.”

Throughout his speech, he wore a self-satisfied look that seemed to say, “I’d rather you not but there’s nothing I can do about it.”

However, his tone was slobby and he has a silly grin on his face, so his words were not very persuasive. Rain almost burst out in laughter at the sight of him.

Still, Ralphus continued,

“I still have a few more questions for you. First... what were you doing after the war until now?”

“Indeed. I had actually suffered a grievous wound during the Zarmine war. I was unconscious for a long time after somehow ordering an honorable retreat. Fortunately, my men carried me back to my castle... but it was ten days until my consciousness returned. Then, I deemed that it was faster to come here in person than it was to come in contact with you.”

His story was inconsistent.

“That sounds like a down-right lie,” Rain mocked in a small voice that was still loud enough for Safir to hear. Another vein popped on Safir’s forehead, but Ralphus ignored him and continued his questioning.



“Then, what about the army you brought with you? The reports say that you brought several thousand men, but I doubt that you had that many soldiers left at Greatark (Safir’s castle).”

“Oh, there’s a simple explanation for that. The subordinates of the late high generals gathered under me. At first, I had only a few hundreds of men with me, but my army grew as I marched here thanks to them. I am sure that my army’s numbers will only continue to grow.”

“So basically, this is how it is,”

Rain laughed and derisively began to recap.

“A bunch of fallen nobles who failed to die thought that they couldn’t keep going the way they were and decided to approach you, who they think will grow into something useful. Am I right? You were probably diligently exchanging letters with surviving nobles for the past month. Damn, I let those nobles who couldn’t even die properly be because I thought they were already done for... but I guess it was a bad move.”

“Wha, what do you mean “it was a bad move”! Your words border treason, commoner!”

Safir raged as he spat out a large volume of spit. Naturally, Rain took no notice of this and simply continued to calmly glare back at him.

The audience chamber suddenly burst into motion.

Only people who ranked high general or above were usually allowed to be armed in the audience chamber, but all of the nobles present were armed with a sword for whatever reason and they reacted to Safir’s anger by placing a hand upon said swords.

The situation had quickly turned explosive.

Ralphus, however, kept everyone in check.

“Hold!”

His sharp rebuke echoed throughout the audience chamber.

All of the nobles froze where they stood. *This guy’s really something*, Rain secretly thought to himself.

“Rain. I’m not done with my questions yet.”

Rain looked back at Ralphus with a sullen look on his face. If Ralphus had been even a few seconds later in his rebuke, Safir would have attacked Rain.

“I still think it’s pointless to talk to him.... But if you say so...”

Rain relaxed his muscles, which had been tensed like that of a wild beast that had been about to pounce upon his prey, and crossed his arms.

“Thank you.”

Ralphus turned back to Safir after flashing a grin at Rain. Safir, who had been about to get up from his seat, also sat back down.

“Then, one last question. Today was originally supposed to be Her Highness’ coronation ceremony. But from your statements earlier, I doubt that you would acknowledge her as the new Queen. So how does Her Highness factor in to your plans? That is what I wanted to ask.”

“That’s——”

Once again, Safir pretended to hesitate before answering. Then, he nodded as if he had decided upon something after a quick glance in the Princess’ direction.

With a foolish grin and a look that suggested that he had attempted to look serious but failed to keep his excitement in check, his face twisted into a strange smile.

“Naturally, I plan to show Her Highness, who has royal blood running through her veins, the respect that she deserves. Thus, how about if I welcome Princess Shelfa as my bride when I rise to power? Of course, it should not be a problem if I make my current wife my concubine——”

“I refuse.”

Shelfa’s voice loudly reverberated through in the middle of Safir’s triumphant speech. It was filled with the raw feeling of how absolutely against his proposition she was.

Safir was stunned into silence with his mouth still left hanging open. His blank expression made clear that he had not thought that he would be refused even in his

wildest dreams.

The remains of a lewd smile lingered on his lips, likely because he had already been imagining his first night with Shelfa.

Speaking of which, Shelfa had already risen from her chair and was looking straight at Rain.

It needn't be said that Rain understood her intentions.

He gave her a small nod.

This had gone on for long enough.

"This is it,"

Rain quietly declared as he took several steps forward.

"Ralphus, do you still have more questions?"

"...No."

"That's fine. In that case, let me speak my mind. Or rather, I'm going to lay down a verdict of sorts."

With his arms still crossed, he articulated each and every word for Safir to hear.

"I won't stand inferior to you. I also won't step down from being a high general. Well, I don't really care about being a general in and of itself, but the circumstances won't allow me to walk away from it right now."

A piercing light gleamed in Rain's black eyes.

"And so, from here on out, you and I are enemies. Prepare yourself, Safir!"

"Wha—!"

Safir, who was still sitting on the throne, scooted his bottom further back into the seat as if he was being physically pushed by the pressure in Rain's gaze.

He flailed about and held out the will in front of him like an invisible shield.

“Da, damn you! Are you going to ignore the will of your ruler?! Are you planning to rebel against this kingdom?!”

“...Man, for someone who’s trying so hard to induce guilt in others, I have no idea where you think you’re getting your authority from. I guess that’s what you call hiding behind the bigger bully on the playground,”

Rain said, fed up, and then suddenly yelled, “aah!” as if on purpose while pointing at Safir with his right hand.

Everyone turned around to see what was going on.

“Whoaaa ahh, hot, hot!?”

It was Safir’s wails that echoed throughout the chamber this time.

He leapt off the throne and hurriedly threw aside the will that had burst into flames.

The parchment was not something that should have alighted so easily, but it was burning with great ferocity for whatever reason. It went without saying that Rain had sneakily cast magic on it while everyone was looking elsewhere.

Thus, the will had turned into charcoal while the nobles scurried around. They picked it up in a hurry, but were too late.

“Ahhhhh!”

Safir screamed in a shrill voice filled with grief as he clutched his head.

“Whoaa, that’s a disaster if I’ve ever seen one. You never know what’ll happen in the world... hu~h,”

Rain said in a grave voice as he pensively shook his head.

“The fuck are you saying?!”

Safir forgot his noble-like high speech and began to stomp on the floor like a child. He continued,

“this is your goddamned fault———!!”

His followers behind him were nodding their heads in agreement and howling about how they couldn't forgive Rain's actions. Some of the more bloodthirsty ones had already drawn their swords.

“Hey now, are you really going to go and blame a shy, serious, and quiet guy like me? Man, you guys are harsh.”

Rain laughed shamelessly.

When he threw a quick glance at Shelfa, he saw that she had regained her composure and had a hand in front of her lips as she desperately tried to keep herself from laughing.

*Yep, it's always better for a girl to be smiling...* He thought, as per usual.

“In, in any case, I will not condone you any longer! I'll have you executed as a rebel for committing treason against the kingdom!”

“You call me a rebel, but what's your basis for that? You and I are colleagues, what authority do you have, huh?”

“What are you talking about?! My authority comes from the will!”

“And where's the will?”

“It's right here in my——!”

Safir turned bright red as he raised his sooty, but empty, hand and realized that the will was no longer there. He began to blindly kick at the marble floor. He had snapped.

“Shut up, shut up! Even if it's been reduced to ashes now, a lot of people have already seen it. There's no use trying to trick people into thinking it didn't exist! No matter what you say, I'll marry Her Highness and rule over this kingdom!!”

“Didn't the Princess flat out refuse you just now?”

“Be, be silent! Her Highness simply said something that she didn't really mean because she was embarrassed. Our marriage has already been decided.”

“You need to shut your mouth!!”

Rain suddenly shouted in a thunderous voice.

Safir was stunned into silence in the middle of what he had been saying by the force of Rain’s voice. Silence rang throughout the chamber once again. Rain continued,

“stop spewing nonsense. I never had any intention of letting you have your way to begin with. I’ll have you give up on marrying the Princess. Though I think you really need to give up on other things, too.”

“Give, given enough time, I’m sure that I can persuade Her Highness into consenting to marry me. You, you have no right to stop me!”

“What kind of shameless nonsense are you going on about? No one likes clingy guys... But whatever. Listen up.”

Rain looked down in contempt straight into Safir’s eyes and said,

“I doubt there’s even a one-in-a-million chance of it ever happening, but even if the Princess did consent to marrying you, I’d never let it happen.”

Safir looked back up at him in indignation while Shelfa stared at Rain with great anticipation.

“The Princess is certain to be unhappy if she married you. Her opinions don’t matter this time. I’ll never let it happen no matter what. Understand, you idiot? On that note, Princess, your wishes no longer matter. Anyways...”

Before Rain could say, “please return.”

Shelfa sprang up from her chair and immediately began running. Before Rain could stop her, she ran straight up to him and leapt into his arms.

“My opinions regarding this matter have been clear from the beginning, Rain!”

Lost in how adorable she was, Rain hugged her back and pat her head and then froze up in the next moment. Now that he thought about it, they were still in the audience chamber of all places, not alone by themselves, and not only were the stupid nobles still here, but Ralphus was also right next to them.

Even Rain was a little uneasy as he snuck a side glance at his friend. However, Ralphus was neither taken aback nor reproachful, but instead looked back at them with a gentle smile.

*What, were we that obvious?... Then I guess I don't have to hide it anymore.*

Unlike Ralphus, however, there were others present who *did* care.

They included all of the nobles, save for Ralphus, who were present. Especially Safir.

"Damn you!"

Safir was trembling so much that Rain almost wanted to tell him that he didn't need to shake so hard as he stood up ram-rod straight and pointed at Rain. Safir continued,

"I have you now! You laid your shameful hands on Her Highness and made her victim too your lustful desires! How dare you?!"

"Hey hey hey! Stop making up such pleasant fantasies!"

Rain yelled back sullenly.

Shelfa was still clinging on to Rain with no intention of letting go.

While no one could fault Safir for jumping to conclusions based on the circumstances, his accusations were still quite outrageous. Rain continued,

"quit thinking on your own terms! That's that *you* want to do, so stop lumping me together with you! Besides, don't just come out now and start saying whatever you please! I've never liked that about you!"

He swiftly pulled out his magic sword, quite fed up with the other man.

The nobles braced themselves as the sword began its characteristic buzzing and its blade was enveloped by a bluish-white aura. Rain continued,

"you should have stayed holed up in your castle and raised a cat in your room or something! But instead, you came barging in here with your stupid ambitions. I'll beat the crap out of you and toss you into the pond out back, so don't you move a muscle!!"

The nobles drew their blades at once at Rain's mighty declaration of war.

To begin with, they were convinced that they "could not ever lose to the likes of Rain," which Rain actually found rather convenient.

For better or worse, they knew that they had the upper hand in terms of numbers, and ignoring the unlucky few who would get caught in between the battle, they felt that it was a given that the "impertinent commoner" would soon become a corpse.

It was evident that the two sides would clash violently, no matter how anyone looked at it.

Safir had completely lost his cool and was shouting around, "kill the bastard——!" in pure rage. His temper, which had been short to begin with, had completely snapped after watching Shelfa leap into Rain's arms.

Rain, on the other hand, was perfectly happy with the situation. He was wearing his usual bold smile as if he was saying, "yeah, come at me all at once wherever you damn well please."

He pushed Shelfa toward Ralphus and prepared to throw himself into the crowd of nobles.

"Wait, Rain."

Ralphus stuck out an arm to his side and stopped Rain yet again.

"Hey hey hey! Again?! Don't tell me you're still hesitating?"

Although fed up, Rain still lowered the tip of his sword and Safir began spitting out,

"oh, Sir Ralphus! I'm glad to see that you understand how things are supposed to be. Execute that traitor with your own hands!"

Immediately, Rain shot back,

"what do you mean, "that traitor"?! Quit spewing out stupid things!"

Then, he turned to his friend and continued,



“...make up your mind already, Ralphus. I don’t want to be enemies with you, but I won’t always defer to your judgements just because of that. I absolutely won’t give in, especially this time. If you’re going to take Safir’s side, then...”

Without taking his eyes off of Ralphus’ usual clam blue eyes, he finished,

“...unfortunately, you’ll be my enemy as well.”

He raised the Siren’s Blade just a little.

Then, Shelfa suddenly took Rain’s hand and squeezed it gently.

When he questioned her with his eyes, she silently shook her head.

Her large eyes stared deep into Rain’s black ones.

Finally, Ralphus said,

“I may be a man of many shortcomings, but I know that I have an eye for people, Rain. You cannot kill me.”

“...Are you saying that I can’t beat you?”

Rain’s black eyes sharpened considerably.

This was one of the things that he had absolutely hated hearing the most.

Ever since that day, that time, so long ago, Rain had hated ‘losing’ to an abnormal degree. It was one thing if he lost a battle between two armies, but he would rather die than lose an individual match. He continued,

“do you really think I can’t?”

“That’s not it.”

Ralphus’ smile never left his face. He continued,

“I know that I cannot best you. I simply wanted to say that, unless you were at your wit’s absolute end, you aren’t one to cut me down over something like this.... Her Highness held you back because she knows this.”

After seeing the anger fade from Rain's visage, Ralphus continued,

"Besides, I'm in favor of overthrowing Safir."

*Huh, that so? Well, no complaints here.*

Rain felt himself relax.

However, there was one person who did the exact opposite and stirred up a fuss. It was Safir, who straightened up and pointed a shaking finger at Ralphus.

"Sir Raphus! What is the meaning of this?! Are you, a member of the Five Great Houses who carries the noble blood of our progenitors who founded our kingdom, taking sides with a mere commoner?! Are you sane?!"

"I am quite sane, I assure you,"

Ralphus responded calmly in contrast to the angry Safir.

However, while his tone was even, the contents of his words were merciless.

"Safir, I refuse to accept you as my king. I cannot detect any truth in your words. You haven't said a single thing with your own words this entire time, but instead you've been using His Late Majesty's will as a shield to hide yourself while you enact your personal desires. Why should I honor someone like you as my ruler?"

"S, such sophistry! But no matter how you play with your words, it doesn't change the fact that you are ignoring His Majesty's orders!"

"While I doubt the veracity of the will to begin with——. Still, if it is real, then it is exactly as you say."

*But I am all right with that.*

There was no hesitation in Ralphus' voice. He continued,

"never forget that the bond between a liege and his retainer goes both ways, Safir. You do not earn the right to be king simply because you sit on the throne. I'll say this as many times as you'd like... I refuse to accept you as my king. Besides, I already have someone whom I intend to serve."

An intense light shone in his azure eyes.

“I, Ralphus, will never allow a mere scrap of paper to change my attitude even in the slightest once I’ve vowed myself to the service of another.”

While he did not fly into a rage as Safir had, Ralphus’ words still carried a strong sense of firm resolution.

In other words, he had chosen Shelfa as his master of his own volition and was firmly denying Safir’s claim to royal authority. Rain was more than ecstatic about this, as it meant that he would not come into conflict with Rain’s chosen path.

Rain slapped Ralphus across the back.

“Nice! Alright, we’ll be going drinking tonight... and it’s on you,”

Rain cheerfully pitched in.

“...Sir, Sir Ralphus has betrayed usss!!”

One of Safir’s staff officers shouted all off a sudden. On that note, the entire chamber was soon filled with angry voices censuring Ralphus.

“Sir Ralphus! No, Ralphus! I won’t forget what you’ve just said! You’d best keep that in mind!”

Safir finally drew his own sword and pointed it cleanly at Ralphus.

In contrast, Ralphus still looked as calm and composed as he always was.

“Everyone here is aware of what I’ve said, the heavens are aware of what I’ve said, and most importantly, I am aware of what I’ve said. I don’t need you to remind me.”

Elated, Rain began,

“alright! Now then——”

“Wait, I tell you,”

Ralphus said as he grabbed Rain’s shoulder before the latter could run off. He

continued,

“it’s simple enough to defeat Safir here and now, but that would complicate things later.”

“Later? What do you mean, later?”

“Think about it. The fact that Safir had the will has spread throughout the entire castle. If we defeat him here, people might misunderstand and think that we murdered him because he was inconvenient to our designs. Safir’s army is also here on stand-by. The castle would turn into a battleground.”

“I don’t really care about any of that... But I get that you’re the worried mostly about the Princess.”

Rain sighed and lowered his magic sword.

This situation had actually been well within his predictions. Knowing his friend’s personality, he knew that Ralphus would naturally be worried about that stuff.

However, Rain personally thought that they were better off defeating Safir now even if it meant turning a blind eye to a few potential misunderstandings and the dangers that may accompany them.

“Knowing how clever you are, I knew that there was no way you wouldn’t realize this. You were waiting for me to stop you again, weren’t you?”

“Nah, this time, I would’ve gone on with it if you hadn’t stopped me.”

“I doubt that.”

Ralphus shook his head and then turned to Shelfa and said,

“it is just as you’ve heard, Your Highness. The final decision lays with you... But I believe that Your Highness’ name will be tarnished if we overthrow Safir here. I propose that we withdraw for the time being.”

Shelfa instantly questioned back,

“I don’t care about what happened to my own name, but would people speak ill of you

and Rain as well, Lord Ralphus?"

"Please do not mind us. We are simply following the path that we believe in. Please think only of yourself and give us your decision."

Instead of replying immediately, Shelfa lowered her eyes for a little while. Eventually, she looked up again and looked at Ralphus' smile before resting her eyes on Rain.

Doing his best to lighten up the mood, Rain smiled and said,

"it'll be fine no matter what you decide. Please don't worry about things too much and just tell us what you think. It's okay if we withdraw, and it's okay if we fight. The only thing that changes is whether Safir dies now or later."

Still looking a little pale, Shelfa sighed out in relief. She had reached a decision upon hearing Rain's words.

"Let us withdraw. I would hate for the people who are dear to me to be slandered. Besides, I have no particular attachment to this castle. This is because I have already decided that the place where I belong is——"

Shelfa stopped mid-sentence and held her silence as her cheeks flushed red. Then again, Rain already had an idea of what the rest of the sentence was supposed to be so there was no need to ask her to continue.

*Yep, so this is what we're going with.*

Rain nodded at Ralphus and Shelfa and turned to the nobles, particularly Safir, who were slowly but steadily closing the distance between them with swords in hand.

The sight of several dozen nobles coming at them with drawn swords was like a moving thicket of blades.

Still, Rain raised a hand at them without a shred of tension.

"Well, we'll be drawing back for now. Later, Safir."

"What do you mean, "later"? There's no way I'd just let you go!! I'll have all of you, save for Shelfa, die here!"

“Hey, hey, did you really just call the next person in line for the throne without her proper title? And your intensions are pretty transparent as to why you don’t want the Princess dead.”

*Ugh, this is why lechers are so...*

As he spoke, Rain abruptly swung the magic sword dangling in his hand diagonally upward.

“Hyah!”

*Bang!*

Safir’s scream and the destruction of the back wall sounded out in succession. Safir sank down to the floor with his sword still in hand. A portion of his presumptuously curly blond hair had disappeared and a red line appeared on his cheek. Blood oozed down from the wound.

The nobles stealth~ily looked behind them with their hair standing on end.

The Sunkwoll flag that had been hung up over the back wall was slashed diagonally, and a large fissure ran through the stone wall behind it.

Rain flashed a grin.

“Hey, don’t get it wrong. You guys aren’t letting us go here. We’re doing you the favor of withdrawing for now. It’d take me a second to kill you if I really wanted to, Safir.”

*Heh, the idiot.*

Or so Rain said, but Safir and the rest of the nobles did not appear to have been listening. Unrest was spreading through their numbers like ripples on water. They had figured out what Rain’s magic sword was.

Safir scrambled up in a panic and hid himself behind the group of his comrades. His actions held neither shame nor honor.

Some began to say, “a ranged attack... th, tha—that...” in a strange voice.

“Man, everyone who sees this has the same exact reaction. Hahaha!”

Rain laughed heartily but soon found himself facing Ralphus' surprised gaze as he took a quick glance to the side. *Oh, right, he didn't know about this yet*, he recalled.

*Well, not that I particularly care whether he knows or not.*

"Now then, shall we hurry up and withdraw?"

Rain cheerfully readied his magic sword again.

"I've always wanted to try this at least once. Let's go out with style!"

Answering to its master's wishes, the dancing blue aura glowed even brighter.

Once again, Rain sharply swung his magic sword.

The bluish trail of light that it carved outshone the light of the chandelier above their heads.

This time, its target was the stupidly large doors of the audience chamber. In a burst of destruction that was sure to bother more than a few people, the thick and heavy double doors exploded into small, broken fragments. The sword's "invisible slash" had pulverized even the walls on the opposite side of the hallway and had opened up a huge hole.

"Well then, let's go,"

Rain said with a bright expression.

Afterward, however——

Ever Rain could not have anticipated the complicated turn of events that were soon to arise.

# CHAPTER 5

## GOD-GENERAL VS GENIUS, SHOULD THEY FIGHT

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### PART 1

*-A little while before Rain had smashed apart the doors of the audience chamber and departed. –*

Selphie and her friend Yuri were in a particular saloon in the castle together.

There were several tables scattered throughout the room that were covered by flawless tablecloth paired together in set with chairs of gorgeous texture. Selphie and Yuri were sitting on splendidly decorated sofas that had been placed in the corner of the room.

The saloon had originally been created as a place for high generals to gather and converse, but was hardly in use at the moment because the number of high generals had decreased sharply after the war.

It was the most suitable place to hold secret talks.

There were a few more people in the room along with the two girls.

First, there was a heavily bearded man of a strong and sturdy build who looked like a mountain bandit. In stark contrast to him was a slender youth with effeminate features. Their names were Gwen and Nigel, respectively, and were aides to General Ralphus. This was Selphi's first time seeing them, and she thought that she would be hard-pressed to find a pair who were as contrastive to each other as those two.

They were seated around a table that was a little way from Selphie and Yuri, and another group, composed of Rain's three aides —Gazaram, Leni, and Senoa— were seated at another.

Then, there was one final person.



The person in question, Gunther Valoa, who wore leather armor on his upper body underneath his usual black mantle, was finishing up what he had to say.

“——And that is how it is,”

Gunther closed nonchalantly, looking like he was in a worse mood than he usually was. He continued,

“Lord Rain will likely open hostilities against Safir’s party in the near future.”

Silence.

Gunther had sounded like he was not talking about anything important, but on the contrary, the contents of his speech had been anything but.

To oppose Safir, who boasted about being King Douglas’ successor in accordance to the late king’s will, meant that he would be rebelling against the kingdom of Sunkwoll itself.

The atmosphere in the room tensed up in silence for a moment, likely because everyone had understood this.

Shattering the tension, Yuri suddenly raised her hand and said,

“I have a question!”

Gunther quietly and reluctantly pointed at her. He did not put it into words, but his face made clear that he was thinking something along the lines of, “don’t ask questions on a whim when the discussion’s already over.” Or, perhaps, that was simply how his face looked like to begin with.

“The aides aside, I don’t think there was a point in discussing this with underlings like me and Selphiee.”

“You’re exactly right,”

Gunther said without holding back in the slightest. He continued,

“however, I called the both of you because you are heavily connected with Lord Rain.”

“...Huuh. That how it is?”

Even Yuri was having a difficult time having her way while talking to Gunther. Selphie found herself thinking that this was funny, despite the occasion.

*No, this isn't the time to find things funny*, she pulled herself together in a panic. This could be a major crossroad in her life. She had never in her wildest dreams thought that she would ever find herself in this situation, but surprisingly, she did not find herself hesitating in the slightest. Instead, her heart was racing. Just because she wasn't hesitant didn't mean that she wasn't anxious.

“If that's all ya had to say.”

The mountain bandit-like man abruptly stood up. He picked up the giant battle axe, which looked like it could kill by its looks alone, from the floor and slung it over his shoulder.

He looked more like a self-made mercenary, or even a straight up mountain bandit, than a knight.

“I'm goin' back to the courtyard. I hate that shithead Safir's guts, but I'm still Boss Ralphus' aide. I'm not the one who's gonna be doin' the decidin'.”

Then, the effeminate Nigel, who had been sitting with him, quickly followed suit. He headed straight for the exit without saying a single word.

Selphie had secretly been wondering what he sounded like, so she was a little disappointed that she did not get a chance to hear him speak. Though, she knew that this was not the time to be thinking about such things.

Gwen followed Nigel out of the room, but before he walked through the door, he calmly turned and said,

“Gunther.”

“What is it?”

“I hope we don't become enemies. Though, knowin' the boss, I doubt I need to worry.”

“Not really. I'll simply defeat you with my full strength should the need arise.”

Selphie could only see his profile, but Gunther did not seem to have changed his expression and his voice had not wavered. In other words, he was being as unsociable as ever.

She thought that Gwen would be upset, but instead he burst out in laughter like a howling tiger as if he found something hilarious.

“I like that part of ya, ya know that?”

After he finished laughing, he merrily raised a hand and said, “see ya!” as he left the room. Incidentally, Nigel had already left a while ago without saying a single word. They both appeared to be commoners, but they had rather prominent personalities. The only commonality they shared was their loyalty to their liege.

Without betraying any sign of lingering attachment to the now-closed door, Gunther turned around to face the group of Rain’s aides.

In an incredibly offhanded tone, he asked,

“and what will you people do?”

He sounded as if he couldn’t have cared less. Regardless of how he actually felt on the inside, he was as sullen and as unsociable as ever on the surface.

Leni sighed and raised a single hand as if he was taking a pledge and said,

“yeah, I’ll follow the General. Honestly, I think he’s up to something outrageous again, but, well, I really don’t want him as my enemy either.”

“Fair enough,”

Gunther nodded without even the slightest trace of a smile. He continued,

“and you?”

“Hey now, I’ll follow him too, of course.”

Gazaram, whom Gunther had turned his eyes to, answered decisively while looking vexed that he had even felt the need to ask. Gazaram continued,

"I'll never forget how he took me under his wing. I've already decided that I'd die at his side."

Selphie was deeply moved by the stern-faced aide's resolve, but Gunther simply replied, "fair enough," as if it was none of his concern.

His deep green eyes, which sometimes could come off as a bit cold, turned to Senoa next. Senoa, in return, turned away in a conspicuous manner.

"I, I... that's..."

Senoa, who Selphie had gotten the impression that she was always angry, looked flustered. Her appearance suggested that she was a completely pure-blooded noble, so it probably wasn't easy for her to make a decision. Even Selphie could guess that much.

"I'd like it for you to decide as soon as possible. It's troublesome to be unsure of who's an ally and who's an enemy."

"Mr. Gunther?"

Yuri raised her hand again and continued,

"aren't you gonna ask us?"

"...Do as you like. There won't be any effect on our military formation even if the two of you were to join forces with Safir."

*Whoa. This gloomy man just laid it out straight.*

Yuri complained under her breath as she was curtly rejected by Gunther. Selphie shared her sentiments, but then again, she realized that what he had said was technically correct.

Senoa, who had been contemplating so seriously that she had not even heard this exchange, abruptly turned to Leni.

"Sir Leni. No, Sir Lelbyni! Are you sure about this? This means that you will be turning against the kingdom itself!"

“Eh... Even if you put it like that... My mother just happened to be a part of the lesser nobility. So the entire betraying the kingdom thing doesn't actually bother me too much. And all things said and done, I've been following the General for a long time now.”

He scratched his head and stood up as if he was fleeing from the situation.

“On that note, I'll be returning to the courtyard too.”

“Wait! Is that your only reason, Sir Leni?! That's your only reason for turning your back against Sunkwoll?!”

“...No, I have a proper reason for it.”

Leni, who had been half-way out of the room, stopped in his tracks and turned around. He continued,

“I've always been timid and easily scared ever since I was born, you see. Everyone around me always called me a coward.”

Senoa blinked her blue eyes in awkward embarrassment.

It appeared that she had been one of them.

As Selphie looked on, Leni smiled and said, “no, no, it's not like I'm trying to be sarcastic or anything,” as if he was trying to make Senoa feel less uncomfortable. Then, he quietly continued,

“but the General... he was the only person who didn't use that as an excuse to ridicule me. He yells at me a lot, but strangely enough, he's never made fun of me.”

——*That's my reason, I think.*

Leni scratched his head again, embarrassed, and left the room. Riding his momentum, Selphie stood up as well.

“Selphie?”

“I’m going back as well. Yuri, you’re coming with me, right?”

“——Well, it’s not like there’s anything else I can do. I guess I’ll have to ask the auntie down the street to look after my little sister again.”

Yuri shrugged and got up as well.

Gunther and Gazaram headed for the door in silence.

Then, after the four of them had taken a few steps out of the room.

They heard the door slam open with a huge *bam!* behind them.

“W, waait!”

*Oh, she’s not talking in her usual strained voice.*

Selphie turned around in surprise.

The blonde Senoa looked strangely cornered and was on the verge of tears.

“I’ll not have you simply leave me behind! I’ll follow General Rain as well!”

Selphie had always thought that Senoa was somewhat of a nasty person.

——However.

Strangely enough, she did not dislike the other woman all that much at the moment.

“Fair enough,”

Gunther nodded petulantly.

From somewhere far away, they heard the sound of something being destroyed.



It was clearly the sound of something being smashed to pieces, and Selphie instantly thought,

‘has the fighting already begun!?’

Gunther was the first person to begin running.

He had been the first person to react to the noise, and on top of that, his was not the speed of a normal person either. His figure grew smaller before Selphie’s very eyes.

Selphie and Yuri desperately chased after him in silence, and Gazaram and Senoa chased after them in turn. Leni had already had a head start on them to begin with, and Selphie could not see him anywhere.

Then, four armed knights suddenly jumped out from behind the corner of the corridor before them. They had probably invaded the castle from the courtyard.

Their gaudy outfits absolutely reeked of the nobility. As further proof of their identity, they had drawn their swords the moment that they laid eyes upon the group.

However, one of them had looked beyond Selphie and the rest and shouted, “is that Lady Senoa of the Estherhart house?!” the moment he saw Senoa. The female aide was more well-known than Selphie had originally thought.

“Surely, you aren’t siding with the commoners?!”

another soldier with a mustache yelled.

“Don’t misunderstand. My social status has no bearing on this matter. I am General Rain’s retainer!”

Senoa declared rather happily, as if she had finally freed herself from past chains.

“You fool! It’s all the same! How pathetic of you, for someone who was born from a noble house! We will grant you the divine punishment you deserve!”

There was no convincing them otherwise.

The began attacking at once.

“Enough with your babbling! I haven’t become weak enough to get killed by greenhorns like you yet!”

Gazaram howled as he charged into the fray.

He was already attacking by the time that they had realized that he had drawn his sword. The mustached soldier tried to ready his sword, but did not make it in time and fell after taking a hit to the head. Realizing how formidable Gazaram was, two of the remaining three knights turned to face him. The only problem was the fourth.

He had rushed headlong in Selphie’s direction instead.

“Kyah!”

As a result of her daily training, Selphie was able to draw her sword on reflex and meet him evenly.

*Claaaash.*

Sword hit sword, causing Selphie’s blade to chip. It was probably because it was of a cheap make. She could smell the scent of metal. It abruptly reminded her of the sensations she had felt when she had been attacked during the parade.

“Selphie, I’ll back you up!”

“Hold, Yuri! They’re fighting one-on-one! It’s underhanded for you to assist her!”

Senoa spewed out her useless knightly spirit as she stopped Yuri.

*D, don’t say that please help me~.*

Selphie was about to cry, but she did not have the leeway to look away from her opponent.

“You cheeky... wench!”

The man pushed his luck upon realizing that Selphie was not going on the offensive and highhandedly began attacking her again. Somehow, she was able to catch his



sword with hers.

*This——is different from a training match!*

Two, three... Selphie understood after just three clashes with him.

He was weak... From Rain's perspective, he would have ranked under even a newborn baby, and he wasn't worth calling an opponent even by Selphie's standards.

*——But, do I have it in me to kill someone again?*

"You spineless coward!"

Mistaking Selphie's hesitation for cowardice, the man brought his sword up and held it over his head with the intent to bring it down on her in one blow. The move left his torso utterly defenseless. Acting upon her warrior's instinct, Selphie quickly stepped in to slash through him——but froze in her tracks.

She recalled her nightmare from the other day.

The horrible sensation of rending through flesh. And her opponent's scream when she had severed through their bones. The red, red blood that had gushed out... And the look of terror and despair on the assassin's face as they fell.

Would she have to experience that all over a——

"Selphie, you idiot! Hurry up and dodge!"

By the time that she had registered what Yuri had yelled out, the blade was already on the brink of falling down upon her.

*Dad!*

Her body would not move.

But the pain never came no matter how long she waited. When she slowly opened her

eyes, Selphie found that her opponent's sword had stopped a hair's breadth away from her head.

"Gwah!"

He had stiffened up with shock etched on his face as blood dribbled down from the corner of his lips. Selphie stepped away from him in a panic. Her body was moving properly again.

When she took a closer look, she found that Gazaram's sword was wedged into his side and yet another sword was poking out from his chest. It was a black magic sword that emitted a strong magical aura.

Behind her opponent was a slender man with a morose visage. Gunther had returned to help at some point during the scrimmage.

When Gazaram and Gunther unhesitatingly pulled out their swords, the knight, who's name she did not know, collapsed to the ground with a thud, dead.

Selphie sank to her knees where she stood before she knew what she was doing.

"\*sigh~\*"

Yuri crouched down beside her.

"Don't scare me like that. I thought you were a goner!"

*...I thought I was, too,* Selphie thought to herself.

A hand was suddenly thrust out before her.

When Selphie looked up, still lightheaded, she saw that Gunther was reaching out to her with displeasure. When she tilted her head, wondering what this was all about, he said, "... take my hand." He was trying to help her up.

Selphie was surprised by his consideration, though she felt that this sentiment might be a little rude to him, as she gingerly grasped his hand.

...It was hard. There were callouses all over it. The callouses around his finger joints were especially prominent.

She knew that anyone who carried a magic sword wasn't an ordinary person, but after seeing his hands she knew that he carried a sword that was befitting of his ability.

He pulled her up with ease, and Selphie was pulled close enough that their bodies nearly touched. In a low voice, he whispered so that only she could hear,

"...this is something you must come to terms with on your own. No one can help you with it."

Selphie unconsciously stiffened up.

When Selphie timidly looked up at him, Gunther nodded lightly in an indifferent manner.

*He saw right through me...*

she thought, but she was surprisingly not too embarrassed about it. This was probably because, while Gunther's word choice was the epitome of bluntness, his tone of voice was rather normal and he did not seem to be trying to take pity on her or anything strange like that. His unexpected kindness moved her to the point of tears. Selphie had always been a crybaby.

Fortunately, Gazaram interjected in a hoarse voice,

"hey, I see you've got a magic sword too. Aren't magic swords with black blades pretty rare?"

"...Let's hurry."

Swiftly evading the question, Gunther sheathed his sword and began running again.

Everyone began running after him, and so, thankfully, no one saw Selphie wiping away her tears.

Or had they?

Selphie looked over at Gazaram, who was running heavily beside her. He was grumbling about how Gunther had ignored him, but the aged knight did not seem too angry about it. Had he actually been looking out for her as well? Had he created her a window of time to wipe her tears on purpose?

Their eyes met.

“Let’s do our best. Yeah, sister?”

His stern face changed into a grin.

“Ye, yessir!”

Selphie replied in a voice louder than she needed it to be and returned her gaze to Gunther’s back.

*Yeah, yeah that’s right... I need to work hard. Dad worked hard until the bitter end.*



“You’re in the way!”

“Gaah!”

The magic sword flashed once.

Several soldiers who just so happened to be in its path were sent crashing into the wall in a spectacular fashion and stopped moving.

Rain took point and sent his enemies flying with one side-sweep of the Siren’s Blade whenever they appeared in front of him.

But he hadn’t killed them.

The invisible slash only carried as much power as Rain wanted it to. While it was capable of destroying sturdy walls, it was also able to simply send people flying at will. There was no weapon that was more convenient when dealing with large groups.

“...The ‘Siren’s Blade,’ which was said to be responsible for the fall of Celestia in the ancient past. To think that it truly existed.”

Ralphus glanced at the bluish-white magic sword from the corner of his eye and shook his head as he ran next to Rain.

“A sword depends on its user, doesn’t it? There’s no sin in the actual blade itself... Well, I’ll admit that it’s a bit of a strange sword, though...”

Rain’s words trailed off at the end.

The sword already invited enough misunderstandings as it was, so he didn’t want to say anything unnecessary and add insult to injury.

He looked away from Ralphus, who still looked like he had questions, and purposefully increased his speed. The stairs that they had been running down had ended and they ran into the courtyard from the nearest exit. Fortune smiled upon them as Gunther and their other comrades spilled out from a different exit at the same time.

“Oh, Gunther! It looks like you explained everything properly.”

“Yes.”

Gunther bowed lightly with his usually grim face. Senoa and their other comrades all looked like they had broken free of something (put differently, they looked desperate), and appeared to have had decided to follow Rain.

Rain nonchalantly looked over to Senoa.

“Hey, Senoa!”

“Ye, yes?!”

“Is everything okay with you? You have a sick mom back at home, don’t you? Will everything be alright?”

Senoa’s look of alarm was rather impressive.

“H, how did you know that?”

“You underestimate me. I know everything there is to know about my own subordinates. ——So, is everything going to be okay with you? You can go home if that’s what your filial piety drives you to do, you know.”

Her beautiful features twisted to the brink of tears for a brief moment, but Senoa regained her stiff expression and flatly rejected the offer.

“We employ many attentive servants at home. I am sure that they will bring my mother to safety should anything happen.”

“I see.”

Rain simply nodded and accepted Senoa’s answer. Still, he kept in mind to keep her situation under consideration.

Senoa jerked up and trembled a little when he slapped her shoulders in an attempt to cheer her up.

Rain turned to face the mass of soldiers before him.

“General, you were safe!”

“Look, it’s Rain! He’s the enemy, everyone!”

Both armies began calling out as Rain and the others approached. The courtyard was currently densely packed with troops. Although Sunkwoll was a small kingdom, the courtyard of Galfort Castle was as wide as you’d expect of any royal castle. The troops were divided up in to two armies, one belonging to Rain and Ralphus’ allied forces and the other belonging to the nobles who had joined Safir, and the two factions were glaring daggers at the other.

As the highest-ranked commanders of either armies were not present, they had simply been standing around as the tension built up around them, but that tension had finally broken upon Rain and the others’ arrival.

“Archers, at the ready!”

Someone short-tempered from the enemy ranks called out. The archers who had been stationed at the corner of the enemy army’s formation readied their bows as one.

Their unit commander was on the brink of giving the order to fire.

Naturally, Rain and Ralphus' forces had not remained silent either. Rather, they had responded faster than the enemy army, which was comprised mostly of nobles, and readied their archers before them.

One wrong step would mean that the courtyard would become a battlefield.

"All of you shut the hell up!"

*Crackle crackle crackle!*

Rain raised a fist to the heavens as he scolded the soldiers, activating magic that promptly dropped countless bolts of lightning down upon the enemy ranks.

They were so bright that the entire area turned blindingly white, and clumps of earth burst out wherever the lightning fell. The lightning hit only the sparse areas of emptiness within the densely packed noble army, as if someone had guided them on purpose.

It was fortunate that the lightning hadn't hit anyone, for if it had, it would have spelled out disaster for the enemy army.

Both armies, which had been in an uproar, quieted down at once.

After making sure that everyone had settled down, Rain hoisted Shelfa up in his arms and mounted Kris, who had come over at some point.

Ralphus, too, had returned to his aides in a hurry in order to explain what was going on.

Rain sat Shelfa down in front of him and deliberately glared at the enemy army.

"Hey, don't go dishing out orders when you're just an underling! I'd be more than happy to oblige if you really wanna go at it, but as you've seen, I can use as much magic as I please. It won't be a problem for me that you have a few more numbers on your side. So, do you still wanna fight?!"

He was obviously threatening them, but the enemy army was rendered silent. Most of them had hardly ever seen magic before, and they looked like their legs would give out from under them at any moment.

At a brief glance, it was easy to tell that the majority of the commanders in Safir's army were either nobles or from noble families and that commoners only populated the lower ranks. Even then, the commoners had likely been conscripted into the army against their will.

Since the nobles who commanded the army were stunned into a stupor, no one did anything to fight back against Rain.

After confirming that everyone had remained quiet, Rain turned to his own army and began to speak.

"I'm sure you all know this by now, but Safir has returned to the castle with His Late Majesty's will. Apparently, the will said that His Majesty has left all future matters in Safir's hands."

Ignoring the small commotion that was stirring up, Rain continued,

"however! I believe that the will is fake. That idiot Safir probably forged the will by copying the late king's handwriting. While that's preposterous on its own, what's even worse is that he tried to make the Princess his in order to solidify his own political power. He completely ignored the Princess' wishes and tried to force her into marrying him. And just to satisfy his own lust and greed! Now, he's planning on getting rid of me for interfering with his plans."

A cry of anger suddenly burst out from the crowd.

Intense booing echoed around, mostly from Rain's army. While it was a given for Rain's army, most of the knights in Ralphus' army were commoners as well, and they were generally resentful of the nobles' treatment of them.

The reason that Rain's and Ralphus' armies had an overwhelming number of commoners in their ranks was not due to favoritism or anything of that sort. It was simply the natural result of recruiting knights based on ability alone.



In any case.

It was only natural that the commoner knights, who had been used to the nobles' constant oppression of their class, had erupted in rage upon hearing Rain's story. After all, Princess Shelfa herself was sitting in front of Rain with her brows furrowed, nodding in agreement as he spoke. There was no room for doubt.

Rain raised a hand to silence the crowd and eloquently continued,

"Ralphus and I've decided to break off our relationship with Safir, of course. But there is nothing for you to fear! The Princess, who has taken sympathy on us for breaking away, has agreed to come with us. We will never become traitors to the crown as long as we walk with Her Highness Princess Shelfa, who stands with us here today! So please, follow Ralphus and me without worry!"

As he spoke, Rain took Shelfa, who was sitting in front of him, by the waist and lightly lifted her up and seated her on his right shoulder so that she could be easily seen by everyone.

Shelfa blinked her large eyes in surprise upon being lifted up as easily as a doll, but she soon smiled brightly and lowered an arm around Rain's neck.

A loud cheer of jealousy, or perhaps of bliss, arose from the knights.

"Safir, that stupid piece of shit, will probably start telling people that I kidnapped the Princess or something. But, I want you to be the ones to decide who's telling the truth! You can decide who you want to side with after that."

Without even being told what to do, everyone in Rain and Ralphus' allied forces raised a fist and made clear their intentions. It was easy to decide who was in the right after seeing the Princess nestle close up to Rain with great familiarity.

It was only appropriate that it was Shelfa's attitude that prompted their decisions.

She had instinctively wrapped her arms around Rain's neck simply because she was happy for the attention he was giving her, and not because she was acting for the sake of eliciting a specific reaction from the crowd. There were no such cunning calculations in her actions.

Still, her innocent behavior held tremendous effect.

A cheer that seemed to rumble the very ground erupted from the impromptu allied forces. All of the soldiers were pumping their fists into the air and calling out Shelfa's, Rain's, and Ralphus' names in succession.

They had completely been united as one.

If Shelfa had not been there with them, even Rain and Ralphus, despite their popularity, would not have been able to dispel the touch of uneasiness from their armies. But, since Shelfa, who carried royal blood in her veins, was with them, they were able to spread a sense of security. For the soldiers, if Rain and Ralphus had sworn allegiance to the Princess, it would mean that they, too, would be working for her cause.

Furthermore, there was no one in the army (which was comprised mostly of men) who was disinclined to work for the obviously beautiful Shelfa's sake.

Everyone was burning in enmity against Safir, who had tried to make the Princess his against her will. On the other hand, Safir's army was naturally in turmoil.

Without a moment's delay, Rain said,

"alright! We'll be departing for Cortecreas Castle. Regardless of whether we end up choosing to fight or not, we need to get out of here first!"

*Yeahh!!*

A spirited cheer rang out from the army in chorus, and Leni and Rain's other aides began dishing out orders. One after another, the troops began to move out toward the castle gates.

Rain had prepared a supply unit with provisions in advance when he first received news that Safir was coming.

Only, he had yet to earn Ralphus' consent about going to Cortecreas Castle. Even Rain

had not thought that Safir would have picked a fight with them quite so soon, so he had missed the chance to discuss things with Ralphus beforehand.

Still, Starhill (Ralphus' castle) was much too close to the capital anyhow.

*Sorry, but I'm gonna call the shots on this one,*

Rain thought as he looked apologetically at his friend.

Ralphus smiled from up on his horse, nodded, and gave his troops the order to form ranks. He seemed to have understood Rain's intentions.

Rain sighed out in relief, sat Shelfa back down in front of him, and turned his glare to the enemy army. They were in a bewildered daze right now, but no one knew when they would regain their senses and begin attacking.

Rain's allies began to march behind him in an orderly fashion... He could tell that morale was rising just by hearing the rhythm of their beat.

He unintentionally repeated to himself,

"——there is no error to be found in the path you've chosen. I'm sure you'll do just fine."

"Eh?"

Shelfa turned around and peered into Rain's face. She asked,

"what are you talking about?"

"Oh, my bad. Did you hear that?"

*You see, this is...*

Keeping his eyes glued on the enemy, he told her,

“it’s something an old man told me a long time ago, when I was still a kid.”

“Is that so? And... what is he doing now?”

“——I killed him,”

he said as nonchalantly as he could.

Shelfa was not frightened. Instead, she gently gripped his hand.

Her eyes, which were still looking up at him, were as steady as they always were.

“I’m certain that you had no other choice, right?”

“...You really never seem to think ill of me, huh. You still wouldn’t lose your trust in me even if I brandished my sword before you with the intent to cut you down, would you, Little one?”

“Of course. Should such a time ever come to pass, I’m certain that it will be because you had no other choice but to cut me down for my own sake. It’s you, Rain, and no one else, after all.”

A bitter smile crossed Rain’s face.

He wrapped an arm around Shelfa’s waist as she continued to look up at him.

“Should the time come... I’ll pray that that your, and the old man’s, judgement wasn’t wrong.”

Rain went silent and continued to watch over the enemy until the last of his troops had disappeared behind the castle gates.

## **PART 2**

There was a group of three people who stood out from the crowd in more ways than one.

Stores, carts, and food stands were thriving in the plaza where the roads connected from all four cardinal directions. Yesterday's attack had drawn in the people's interest for a time, but everything had completely returned to normal now that things had been cleaned up for the most part.

Still, there remained burns and bloodstains covering the stone pavement, which gathered a few more curious residents of the capital than usual.

However, their attention was focused on the three men and women standing in the plaza... particularly on two of the three, instead of on the embers of the incident.

The three people were far more interesting to the masses than any burn mark.



One of them was a beautiful woman with lovely blonde hair that reached down the middle of her back. She had green eyes that somehow seemed to glisten with a defiant light and thick eyebrows. She was wearing a coat, but its buttons were left undone and you could see a tight-fitting long red dress peeking out from underneath.

Moreover, bold slits were cut in the bust and bottom of the dress, garnering the gazes of the men around her. Only, she was wearing a rapier at her waist, though it was covered by her coat.

And the other.

He was only wearing a loose piece made of silk, despite that it was already winter. He had a kind visage, and was so beautiful that one would feel shivers just by looking at him. His golden fringes covered a part of one of his emerald eyes. At a first glance, he seemed to have been gifted with the features of a popular actor, but the longsword—no, the katana, that was sticking out from his figure set him apart from the average man of delicate features.

His most distinct features were his eyes, which made people who inadvertently made eye contact with him want to bow down before his majesty or at least lower their gaze.

He was a man who seemed to have been naturally endowed with a silent sense of intensity, despite his kind-looking mien.

That man cast one cursory glance over the plaza and muttered a few words.

“The remnants of an enormous source of magic... I can feel that man’s power. He fought here.”

“That man’s? Are you talking about this favored Rain of yours by any chance, Joe? I was wondering why you’d stopped all of a sudden, but I see it was because you felt his presence.”

“Well, yes...”

Joe Lamberck trailed off.

It was a sensation that was difficult to describe, but Joe was proud of the fact that he could expect a normal human to hold the same kind of power as he did. It was truly hard to put the feeling to words.

“Excuse me,”

interjected Shing, who was the only member of the group who didn’t stand out,

“won’t we stand out if we keep standing here? After all, according to the rumors, something awful happened here in the capital just recently.”

“What’s wrong with standing out? We’re about to march our way into Galfort Castle anyway. If we stand out enough, they might even send people over to pick us up. And I’m getting tired of walking.”

Hahahah!

The beautiful woman bent her fair head back and laughed like a man.

Joe let out a chuckle and chided,

“Shing does bring up a compelling argument, Your Majesty. We don’t know for certain whether or not we’ll be allying with this kingdom yet. There is no such thing as exercising too much caution.”

“All right, I get it. Be that as it may, the only time you ever address me by my title is when you’re giving me your honest advice.”

“...Such is the duty of a retainer.”

“I know. But, *you’re* here with us. There’s nothing to fear even if anything should happen, yeah?”

Joe remained silent as he bowed.

He hadn’t thought that the Empress herself would accompany him on this diplomatic visit, but he felt that it was for the best that she had.

Her Imperial Majesty Folnier was quite young for an Empress and carried Chandrys on her shoulders at the tender age of twenty-three. There was no harm in her learning more about the outside world.

The only problem in contention was the fact that they had visited a foreign land with only three people. And that there was at least one person here who had the power to



oppose Joe.

Just then, Joe felt the presence of a multitude of people coming their way from afar.

“——What is it, Joe?”

Folnier asked upon seeing Joe’s eyes abruptly sharpen.

Joe gently closed his eyes and replied,

“Multiple presences... I can feel the presence of over a thousand people coming our way. I believe they are an army.”

“What?! Does that mean that Safir-or-whatever-his-name-was and Princess Shelfa have already begun fighting?!”

Joe broke out into a smile at Folnier’s excitement.

“Who can say... I can hear their footsteps now. They don’t sound very urgent to me.”

“...What do you mean? Then why is such a large army on the move?”

“A moment please.”

After issuing a notice, Joe concentrated all of his senses. He was attempting to feel around for and investigate the approaching army’s presence to the best of his abilities.

“...Most of their number are comprised of run-off-the-mill soldiers and knights. However, there are one... two..... four among them who are emitting considerable power. Of them there are... two who are a cut above the rest. Hmm? There’s one presence whom I cannot quite get a good grasp of?”

He tilted his neck to the side as he pondered, but then he quickly ignored the mysterious presence upon receiving a sudden shock that made him feel as if he had suffered an attack.

“I found you!”

A rush of excitement so strong that it was numbing rushed across his entire body.

And not only that——

Joe felt a ‘surge of power’ of unparalleled vastness that made him feel as though currents of electricity were running through his body. Like how it was easier to assume the strength of a torrent of water if you were able to hear it from far away, Joe was able to surmise his target’s strength *because* of the distance between them.

It was without a doubt that Joe’s target of interest held power and ability far beyond that of everyone else.

It was the very first ‘power’ that Joe Lamberck, the “Fearless God-General”, had acknowledged as his equal in his long life.

“This feeling... and this presence. I remember it! Ha... hahaha. I see, so the boy from back then has already grown this strong? Hahaha...”

Folnier and Shing looked at each other as Joe, rather uncharacteristically, laughed out loud.

And, as Shing had worried, Folnier looked upon Joe with excitement coloring her eyes.

“Joe! Are we finally going to meet this Rain of yours? I’ve been waiting for this ever since you told me about him! So, how is he?”

“How is he... you say?”

“Like I said! Although I doubt that he could ever possibly rival you, this Rain of yours is strong, is he not?”

Joe opened his eyes and smiled faintly.

“I wonder. I would have definitely bested in him battle ten years ago.... Though I’m sure he would have thought otherwise. But, to be honest, I don’t know if that still holds true today.”

Folnier opened her eyes wide in surprise, prompting Joe to add,

“a day’s worth of work for a genius is that of a hundred days’ worth for an ordinary person. His talent was as clear as day to me the very moment I laid my eyes upon him, and I doubt that he has spent the past ten years fooling around.”

He smiled as he finished.

Indeed, Joe had most certainly trembled with fear when his eyes had met Rain's on that day ten years ago. However, he had not been trembling due to the strength that the boy had possessed back then.

*If I can already feel this much power from this boy now, I wonder what kind of terrifyingly strong warrior he'll grow up to be?*

Meaning, that Joe had trembled before Rain's overwhelming potential as a warrior even at his young age.

And Joe's premonitions were never far off the mark.

In fact, the ever-increasing pressure proved that he had been right. The boy who had looked at him with those wolf-like eyes would be here soon. And he would be far stronger than he had been back then now that he'd grown up.

"I would even say that I had met my fate back then."

"I can hardly believe that there exists a warrior who can rival you... But all the more so if you've judged him to be that strong. I absolutely must meet him."

"Yes, I think you should as well. While we're at it, shall we step aside? This way, Lady Fol; Shing, you too. The army is just around the corner."

Joe personally lead the way and moved to a corner of the plaza. Folnier and Shing followed soon after him.

Before long, a group of well-organized knights and foot soldiers appeared on the horizon. The citizens who had been shopping, or simply taking a walk, in the plaza stopped in their tracks at the sound of horses' hooves and the army marching and tiptoed to see who was coming down the road.

The army carried the emblem of a lion with a long mane and was spearheaded by a heroic figure with well-kept, radiant blond hair as they entered the plaza.

“Hey, look, it’s Lord Ralphus...”

“Why’s he here; there wasn’t any notice of him coming or anything. Do you think something happened between him and Lord Safir?”

“If something did happen, it’s obviously Safir’s fault!”

The people began to whisper amongst each other with reverence tinged in their voices.

“...Ralphus is one of the nobles leading this kingdom. He’s surprisingly popular with the people,”

said Folnier, impressed.

There were nobles in Chandrys as well, but their social status did not hold as much importance as the nobles of Sunkwoll.

All of the official positions in Chandrys were elected based on individual merit, save for the seats of Emperor and cabinet minister, which generally followed a hereditary succession.

“Never seat someone in an important office simply because they are nobles. For there is nothing more dangerous to a country as they.”

——Such was the will of King Horsweizen, forefather of the Chandrys Empire.

Thus, it followed that his descendent, Folnier Lucida Chandrys, did not hold a high opinion of nobles. Besides, the nobility of Chandrys had long since been reduced to a mere formality.

And so, the three of them remained shamelessly standing upright as the citizens around them lowered their heads.

On top of that, Folnier had a hand on her hips and was scrutinizing Ralphus up and down as if she was appraising his worth as he approached.

If she had done this to any other noble they would have stirred up a racket, but Ralphus was not one to take offense at her behavior. He simply pursed his lips the moment he inadvertently caught Joe in his gaze. He looked like he wanted to say something, but eventually chose to remain silent and passed by.

The giant knight who accompanied Ralphus as if he was protecting his master and the slender knight opposite of him casually drew their horses closer to Ralphus.

“We could have identified ourselves and talked to him... but let’s meet that Rain of yours first.”

Ehehe... giggled Fohnier.

Her fascination was brought out into the open as her white teeth flashed behind her red lips. Her eyes sparkled with expectation and excitement.

When the first group passed, another unit followed behind carrying a different emblem.

It boasted a life-like white phoenix on a black background. The mythical bird, which was holding a sword emitting a bluish-white aura in its beak, was embroidered on with such skill that it looked like it could fly away at any moment.

Although Fohnier had no way of knowing——this was Rain’s recently modified insignia, as his previous one had simply been all black for the longest time because Rain had said, “it’s a pain in the ass so make it all black.”

Shelfa had offered him a rough sketch for a new design, and the new emblem was based off of it.

“Is this the unit in question, by any chance?”

Shing said after moistening his lips.

Evidently, he was nervous.

“It appears so,”

Joe replied frankly.

Yes... he was close.

And they would finally meet again soon.



“Is something the matter?”

Shelfa, who was riding Kris with Rain, turned around and peered up at him with her angelic eyes.

“Nah... But before that, why do you think something’s the matter?”

He spoke quietly just in case, though he doubted anyone would hear them because they were at the end of the formation.

“I’m not quite sure as to why myself, but I feel like you’re a little nervous, Rain. Your arm is a little tight around me. Not that I’m not happy for it.”

Rain was impressed at how sharp she was.

After praising her, he loosened up the arm in question and lightly pat her on the stomach.

“But you’re only half correct. I’m not really that nervous or anything. Someone with a bit of backbone started to investigate me, is all. I felt them just now.... I remember this ‘surge of power’.”

“Is it... someone you know?”

“Probably. There’s nothing to worry about; his Ekseed... rather, his “Ki” doesn’t feel like he’s trying to pick a fight.”

He was trying to give her some peace of mind, but Shelfa simply stared back at him in silence. She looked a little worried.

Rain laughed and said,

“it’s okay. It won’t be a big deal even in the one-in-a-million chance that we end up fighting.”

“Yes, I supposed you’re right. You’re the strongest person in the world, after all, Rain.”

Rain gave a smile wry smile at her candid words.

But he simply ended the conversation by saying, “yep, exactly.”

*Yeah, there’s no one in the world who can defeat me. ——Not a single soul.*

He saw the plaza before him.

# EPILOGUE

## PHANTOM THIEF BLACK MASK

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*-Just as Rain and Joe were about to meet again. –*

Safir had finally recovered from the two-fold shock of having failed to make the princess his and having his prided curly hair cut off by Rain and had descended to the lowest floor in Galfort Castle.

In any case, he had thought to get rid of the nauseating feeling in the pit of his stomach by looking at a certain something.

The tightly shut door before him was the entrance to something that was closer to a storehouse than an actual room. The thick and heavy door was made out of wood and was reinforced with metal.

Ralphus' unit had been guarding it up until that morning, but no one stood in front of the door now that they had all left with their master.

Safir jerked his chin at the men he brought down with him and readily commanded them to “break the lock.”

A few men armed with large axes immediately stepped up and began to hammer down on the lock. They broke the once-sturdy lock into pitiful pieces with no time to spare.

“Hehehe... now open it. I want to see it all with my own e——”

Safir trailed off mid-word.

He stopped because he had seen what was on the other side of the door which his men had swung open wide.

The space inside the storehouse could have easily fit several dozen men and was



surrounded by walls of stone.

But, something that should have been there was missing.

It was empty, and completely so. There was no trace to be seen of the hoard of treasures that should have had been piled up inside.

Instead, a strange magic circle was etched onto the four corners of the storehouse... along with one other thing. In the center of the room was a single scrap of paper.

A sensible servant picked it up in his petrified master's stead.

"G, give me that!"

Safir jolted into motion and snatched it from the man.

The piece of paper, which he had read in a panic, thus read:

*To a certain greedy noble, from the mysterious phantom thief "Black Mask."*

*I have stolen all of the treasure.*

*Do forgive me for not officially introducing myself, as my identity is a top-secret.*

*Farewell!*

"Wh, wh, wha..."

Safir began to quaver with the scrap of paper still in his hands. The color drained from his face, and he bit his lips so hard that blood ran down his chin.

Then, he shrieked,

"what's this about some black maaaaask?! Damn himmmm, I'll never forgive himmm!!

I'll kill him, I fucking kill him deaddddddd!!!”

Afterward, upon having searched every nook and cranny of the castle, they discovered that the armory had also been emptied out.

Instead of weapons, the armory was instead stocked with piles of stinky old soldier's clothes, and it was difficult to discern why that was. It was likely Rain's idea of harassment.

Galfort Castle was thrown into a turmoil for an entire day because Saifr collapsed while frothing at the mouth upon hearing about the old clothes.

# SIDE STORY

## THE WORDS THAT WERE GIVEN

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### PART 1

The mountains, which had been overflowing with green just the other day, were now colored by a blanket of snow.

But even the snow did not make it all the way down the mountainside.

Here, around this single house that stood isolated off the side of the mountain path, the snow rarely piled up even though it snowed often.

There was a lone old man sitting on a chair on the narrow porch of the house, which as not too different from a log cabin, looking over at the mountain as it was dyed red by the evening sun.

Hawke Walton.

He had a lean figure as a result of the lean muscle resting directly upon his bones. His hair, which had once been jet black, was now whiter than it was black. He had grown old. Quite old, at that.

However, while his countenance was serene, he unfortunately was absolutely nothing like the good natured old men who populated the streets.

For example, on the occasion where he would go to town to shop, the residents who did not know him would move aside to let him pass. They avoided Hawke subconsciously upon seeing him approach.

This wasn't because Hawke looked grim or stern. As mentioned above, he had a kind and serene countenance. It was simply that everyone felt an invisible pressure from him as he leisurely walked along the road and felt the need to look away.

It was rare for anybody to look him in the eyes.

This was because (and this was true of any warrior above a certain level of skill)

something akin to a kind of ‘power’ was imbued in his eyes, which caused people to hesitate when they looked straight at him no matter how calm he looked otherwise.

They likely saw the old man’s history as a warrior reflected directly in his pupils.

This was the kind of old man Hawke was.

Hawke, who had been sitting as still as a stone statue for a while, finally shook out his shoulders a little.

Then, he slowly turned his head and moved his gaze to the mountain path.

A lone boy climbed into view as he did.

The boy was wearing black pants and a black shirt. He was also wearing a thin jacket, which was also black. Since his hair was black as well, he was covered from head to toe in black.

Hawke could tell that the stranger was just a boy even from afar.

The boy was probably about fifteen years old, give or take.... But, he could not see even a trace of the fickleness that he would have expected from any other boy his age in his face.

The boy drew closer as Hawke looked over him and finally veered off the mountain path and made his way to the hut.

Hawke quietly stood up without taking his eyes off of the boy. Then, as the boy drew close, he silently beckoned him over.

The boy was so thin that it was doubtful that he was eating properly, and he lacked the healthy color to his skin that a boy his age should have had.

It was easy to mistake the boy for a beggar if you weren’t careful.

However, that was only if you did not pay any attention to his eyes.

Of his entire being, only the boy’s eyes carried a strong presence.

His eyes were as still and tranquil as calm ocean waters, but something about them drew you in the more you looked at them. His mysterious eyes seemed to possess both severity and kindness simultaneously.

And, peering through from the depths of his eyes was unmistakable sorrow——

Hawke had no way of knowing what had caused that sorrow, but it made the boy seem much too mature for his age.

The boy stopped a short distance from Hawke. He kept his gaze focused tightly on the old man.

“Hey there,”

Hawke whispered to break the ice.

He smiled a little and gave a small nod as he continued,

“with a few exceptions, it’s rare for visitors to stop by this mountain hut.... I don’t think we’ve met before?”

The black-clothed boy... surprisingly bowed a little. Perhaps it was his way of greeting the old man.

“No, we haven’t. My name’s Rain. ——You’re Hawke Walton, right?”

“...I don’t use my full name too often anymore.”

Hawke laughed a little and continued,

“but Hawke works just fine. Rain, was it? I’d be happy if you just called me Hawke as well.”

Ignoring what Hawke had just said, the boy pressed on,

“Hawke Walton, the “Sword-Saint of the Wind,” former grand general of Leyfan? I heard that you taught swordplay there for a long time even after you retired from knighthood. Is that right?”

“You’re definitely not wrong. But that embarrassing name isn’t one that I fashioned for

myself, you know.”

Hawke made his rejection of his moniker very clear. He continued,

“and I haven’t been a grand general in Leyfan ever since His Majesty Johann two generations ago.... It’s been quite a long time.”

Hawke never once looked to the sword that was leaning upright against the door, and neither did he stop smiling.

For reasons that were unclear even to himself, he could not bring himself to see the boy before him as his enemy. Even despite the fact that the boy’s aims had been evident in his actions ever since their interactions had begun.

It might have been because of the sorrow that clouded the boy’s eyes, or it might have been because he had instinctively acknowledged the boy as another warrior like himself.

Indeed, the boy was undoubtedly a warrior.

“Hawke, I don’t care about your personal evaluation of yourself. The only thing I wasn’t to know——”

“What is it... that you want to know?”

Rain’s black eyes glistened when Hawke asked.

“Who is currently the strongest warrior in the world? It’s a simple question. And half of the people who answer say, “Hawke is the strongest.”... When I looked into you, I found that your military history was befitting of that title. Like the time when you drove away several thousand enemy soldiers all by yourself.”

“That’s...”

Hawke smiled wryly as he continued,

“it’s not a lie, but it’s also hard to call it the truth. I just so happened to have a bridge to my back as I fought. And there weren’t several thousand enemies. It was only a thousand at most.”

“I know. But I think it’s impressive even still. Most people would have died as soon as the fighting started and that would have been it for them. You can never underestimate the power of numbers.”

“...The enemy was also excessively wary of me, too.”

“The truth about your abilities will be made clear soon enough.”

Rain slowly drew his sword.

A bluish light suddenly filled the area that had been slowly encroached by the darkness of night.

A sound that was reminiscent of countless flying insects buzzing preluded the forthcoming battle.

The sword that the boy wielded was a magic sword.

Not only that, but one look at the powerful magical aura coming off of it made it obvious that the rune master who had imbued it with magic had been the best of the best.

He could have easily bought an entire village with money to spare if he had sold the sword, especially considering that mages had declined sharply in the current age.

Rain put his challenge to words, though both parties knew that his intent had always been clear from the beginning.

“I want you to show me your power, which people say hasn’t declined even though it’s been a while since you’ve retired.”

“...You don’t seem to be a member of Virgo. And I don’t really accept duels anymore...”

Rain interjected him part-way,

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m fully aware that I’m being a nuisance, but I’m not here for a duel.”

Surprisingly, Rain bowed his head a little once again, perhaps because he was trying to apologize for his discourtesy. He was fully aware that he was asking for a lot. He

continued,

“I’ll stop my blade if I’m sure of my victory. But I want you to come at me with the intent to kill. Don’t hold back on my account. I’m sure that the guards from the capital will acknowledge that my death was out of legitimate self-defense...”

Hawke had long since given up on persuading the boy otherwise.

This was because the gaunt boy had suddenly begun to exert a large amount of pressure.

The boy’s fighting spirit increased exponentially, and he emitted an intense surge of power...

Hawke had never in his long history of battles met someone who had such ‘power’ that was comparable to his own.

Before he realized what he was doing, Hawke had walked over to the entrance to the hut to take hold of his favored sword that was resting there. Then, he walked a few steps forward until his feet reached the earth.

He could not help but do so.

Hawke had realized the boy’s talents the moment that he had seen how Rain carried himself, but Hawke soon found that his initial impressions had been too shallow.

He felt like he was about to tremble before the boy’s might.

Needless to say, Hawke didn’t feel this way due to cowardice, but because he felt a kind of exaltation upon meeting a strong contender for the first time in a long while.

“...I’m glad that you agreed to fight.”

*Then, here I come!*

With a battle cry, the boy shot forward with his magic sword in hand.



He was terribly fast.

He closed the distance between them with a speed that could have been mistaken for instant teleportation and swung his magic sword close to the ground upon invading into Hawke's space.

——However.

Hawke had already drawn his sword by the time that Rain had approached within his sword's reach. His magic sword, now freed from its scabbard, drew a radiant white arc in the air.

“——! What?!”

Rain's black eyes opened wide in shock. His sword-hand reacted a little the moment that they did. In turn, Hawke brought down his sword upon him.

*Claaaaang!*

A harsh sound cried out as magic sword clashed against magic sword.

Rain, unable to withstand the impact with his skinny body, was flung back.

Even still, he deftly twisted his body mid-air in a half-turn and safely landed in a spectacular fashion.

He kept his stance while on his knees even as he looked over at Hawke in astonishment.



Hawke slowly lowered his sword after his perfect upward-diagonal slash.

Once he was back in his original, upright position, he calmly admonished, “my sword is the wind. I’d advise you to stop before you get hurt.”

Or at least, that was what he had told the boy.

On the inside, however, Hawke was astounded.

Rain had been completely unguarded when Hawke had drawn his sword because his speed had surpassed Rain’s expectations. Thus, Hawke had planned to stop his blade right before it made contact and force the boy into admitting defeat.

But things hadn’t gone as he had planned.

Even after being taken by surprise, Rain had still managed to change the direction of his sword. He matched the timing of Hawke’s iai draw and defended himself by stepping to the side. Moreover, he had jumped backwards right before the two swords collided against one another, mitigating the damage he received to a minimum.

This was the reason why he had been thrown so far back.

If, by chance, those movements of his just now had been acted upon purely on reflex—  
—

Then, he surely possessed a natural talent that could only be found in one in a million people.

Hawke was without a doubt that Rain had been learning how to use the sword since he was very young... and even then, he could hardly believe that the boy was so skilled for his age.

Rain, the boy in question, had been staring fixedly at Hawke ever since he had landed, but he gradually broke out into a smile. Eventually, he began to wrack his body with laughter.

“...Rain?”

He only stopped laughing after Hawke called out to him.

“This is the first... This is the first time I’ve met someone who can keep up with me ever since I left home. Hawke, you’re better than the rumors say!”

He ferociously kicked off against the earth as soon as he was done talking.

His skinny figure blurred and created an extended afterimage that melted into the darkness behind him. He was surprisingly fast.

“I see that you’ve undergone some very strict training. However!”

The slash of his sword was like the wind itself——

His enemies of the past had not extolled him so greatly just for show.

Hawke had caught the exact ‘moment’ had Rain had entered his reach and responded with a side-slash.

The speed of the tip of his sword was faster than was possible to see with the naked eye, and the radiant magic sword left behind a trail of white light in the darkness.

Naturally, he thought that Rain would be thrown back yet again.

But, was the figure before him——an illusion!?

“Hmph, you dodged!”

By the time he had noticed, Rain’s image had wavered and disappeared without a trace. Hawke leapt back from where he was to escape the sword strokes that suddenly showered down on him from Rain’s right hand.

The magic sword left behind trails that were much too close to him for comfort.

Rain and Hawke distanced themselves from each other, both parties having failed to ensnare their opponent.

Rain did not press his advantage as if on purpose, perhaps because he had seen

Hawke's breath grow a little ragged.

"I won't fall for the same trick twice. No matter how great of a trick it is."

"I see that you've figured it out."

Rain nodded lightly in response.

"People think that your greatest weapon is that fast sword-drawing attack of yours, at least from what I've heard. But, the truth is, that's not all. You're only able to make the most out of that attack because you have a full grasp of the area around you. Am I wrong?"

"You're absolutely right,"

Hawke replied, as he had no intent of hiding that information from the boy.

It was the first time that anyone had seen through his skill so readily.

Indeed, Hawke's greatest strength lied in his ability to have a precise understanding of the immediate area around him (down to the millimeter) and crush any enemy who entered that space.

It was his one-hit kill, so to speak.

Hawke could split anything, even a fly, exactly in two the moment that it entered that space before his opponent even saw his hand move.

That attack, which was likened to the 'wind,' and his perfect grasp of the area around him created sort of an invisible barrier around him.

Hawke had boasted being unrivaled in battle with these two skills.

"Still... to think that you'd see completely through it after just one bout. I'm terrified of what you'll grow up to be, my boy."

"——I'll take that as a compliment!"

Chunks of earth were sent flying as the boy kicked off again.

His slim figure audibly cut through the wind. Even Hawke, the “Sword-Saint of the Wind,” was finally forced to meet him head on.

*Crackle crackle crackle!*

They faced off two, three more times as the magics imbued within their blades repulsed each other. Then, they distanced themselves again and began running and running side-by-side.

They both ran into the forest of Jura trees nearby.

Hawke shouted,

“even if you’ve figured out the secret behind my skill, it doesn’t change the fact that your attacks are slower than mine!”

The edges of Rain’s lips curled up at Hawke’s provocation and, still running, he called back,

“it’s too early to decide that, Hawke. I haven’t gone all-out yet!”

He took a large step as he spoke and his magic sword became a flash of blue light that rushed at Hawke.

The blue light drew a perfect arc, which Hawke dodged by the hair, and deftly cut through the trees behind Hawke horizontally.

Rain’s body looked like it had wavered gently before Hawke, who was jumping around to avoid the fallen trees.

“Come!”

Hawke’s eyes, which failed to focus on the boy’s figure, mistakenly perceived that Rain’s slender body had suddenly grown in size for a moment. Moreover, an extended afterimage tailed after him.

In the next moment, Rain seemingly ignored the dangers of Hawke’s sword draw and held up his sword high as he approached Hawke directly from the front and unleashed his sword with great strength. Hawke’s sword was repelled as he naively met Rain’s directly. In a moment, Rain turned his wrist over and attacked Hawke again from the

side.

His speed had not decreased in the slightest. His skill with the sword made his attacks seem almost phantasmagoric.

If he had been even a little weaker than Hawke, he would have been split in two before he could even begin to retaliate.

Their shadowy figures approached each other and moved apart, as if being repelled, numerous times within the forest that was silently beckoning the night. Five times, ten times, fifteen times... Sparks crackled and scattered, illuminating the twilight forest each time the magic swords crossed.

*(His attacks are getting faster! He was being serious when he said he wasn't going all out yet!)*

"Your movements are getting dull, Hawke!"

Rain, who had repelled Hawke's attacks, used the tiny window between the latter's attacks to spin around. His foot grazed Hawke's chin when Hawke instinctively jerked back. Rain seamlessly followed up his gymnastics with a sword slash and locked swords with Hawke, who had run up to him.

From across their blades, Hawke said,

"to think that you'd use your entire body as a weapon! Impressive."

"I'm not a knight. I don't care about that over-rated knightly etiquette of yours!"

"I wasn't condemning you; I was commending you!"

After he spoke, Hawke stopped pressing against their swords and abruptly pulled away. Rain, who had barely been keeping up with Hawke in their contest of strength, wavered a little as he was taken by surprise.

Capitalizing on the moment when his opponent's stance had crumbled, Hawke abandoned his sword and moved in fluid motion. He jumped at Rain's chest and swapped places with the boy, then grabbed Rain by the collar as if he was about to pick him up and threw him high into the air.

As soon as he threw him, Hawke flipped up his sword by his toes, secured it in his grasp, and immediately began to sprint. He was running straight for Rain, who had rolled once in the air and had landed in spectacular fashion.

But no matter how nimble he was, as long as he was human, he could not choose where he fell. And he could not be expected to be able to defend himself perfectly during his landing because his movements would be limited.

“This is it!”

Hawke’s timing was perfect.

He lunged at Rain with great force, as if his entire being had become a single lance. He did not intend to skewer the boy, of course. Someone as skilled as the boy would be able to fully understand his defeat even if Hawke stopped just before the attack hit.

——Yet.

At that moment, Rain’s right hand reacted once again. His hand slid in motion and brought his magic sword vertically before his body like a shield.

*Claaaang!*

Sparks flew magnificently as a distorted sound rang out.

Hawke’s thrust had been blocked by the radiant magic sword’s blade.

Rain danced through the air again due to the impact, but this time he was able to land gracefully.

As for Hawke, he was stiff in a lunging posture as he put a hand to his cheek in astonishment. Rain had kicked him as he flew into the air. Luckily, the kick had only grazed him, but it would still leave a bruise.

The problem... was that there was nothing Hawke could do about that kick. It had only missed by sheer dumb luck.



But Rain, on the other hand, had been able to successfully defend himself against Hawke's thrust——

Hawke finally lowered his sword before him and looked toward Rain, who was on the other side of a grove of trees.

The boy was still standing uninjured and was waiting for Hawke to collect himself.

"The fight's only getting started. If you're ready, here I come!"

"——No."

Hawke knelt with one knee on the ground and placed his sword horizontally in front of him. Then, he gently lowered his head.

This was an ancient ritual that had been passed down among Leyfan knights from time immemorial, though it had been lost to the passage of time.

It was a courtesy that one paid only to someone you truly respected and acknowledged the strength of. Rain was the second person that Hawke had ever paid this courtesy to, the first being the master who had taught him the sword.

With his head still lowered, he said,

"I lost... Rain."

"No way!"

Rain denied Hawke's statement in a surprisingly harsh tone and drew closer in long strides. He continued,

"you were the one on the offensive this entire time, Hawke! The fight isn't over yet. It's barely even begun!"

"——No."

Hawke shook his head and breathed with ragged breaths.

"Didn't you say so yourself? That you weren't going all-out? That was because you were just barely managing to hold back in order not to injure me, no? But I've lost the

leeway to hold back against you.... So this is it.”

Upon seeing Rain’s anger wilt away, he continued,

“besides, look at me. I’m so out of breath that I can hardly talk properly. I’ve used up too much of my stamina.”

Rain’s countenance turned melancholy as he fell into silence.

He had probably been so focused on the fight that he had forgotten that Hawke was an old man.

“Still, I don’t intend to use my age and an excuse for my defeat. My skill was supposed to be a one-hit kill to begin with. The outcome of this battle was decided the moment I realized that your attacks were faster than mine.”

Rain completely regained his composure and lowered his black eyes. He looked dispirited rather than satisfied that he had won the fight. Then, as if he was talking to himself, he whispered,

“that’s too bad... I wish I’d met you when you were younger, Hawke.”

He returned his magic sword to its scabbard with a click.

“I’m sorry for the discourtesy I’ve shown you today.”

“Wait!”

Hawke cried out to Rain in a panic as the boy turned around without any further lingering attachments after a low bow.

“It’s already night; are you planning on descending the mountain right now?”

“...Yeah. Is there a problem?”

“Thieves and orcs are known to appear around these parts. Well...”

Hawke beamed as Rain raised his eyebrows in a quizzical manner and continued,

“I suppose they won’t pose a problem for you. But I’ve taken a little interest in you.

Won't you stay over for at least one night?"

Seeing how Rain wasn't about to bite, the old man craftily added without skipping a beat,

"well, what if I say that you can play along with my selfishness as an apology for your "discourtesy"?"

Even Rain had no choice but to fold after that.

He let out a sigh and said, "alright," as he nodded.

Hawke smiled and beckoned the boy over to his cabin.

"My house is a tad shabby, as you can see. But I got my hands on some good vegetables today. I can't offer you much, but I'd like to have supper with you."



Hawke had thought that the boy wasn't getting enough food ever since he had seen Rain climb up the mountain path, but the truth was that the boy was close to starved.

He had completely devoured the soup, which Hawke had made more of, and a lot of bread with tremendous speed.

The boy's appetite made Hawke wonder if he'd had anything to eat for the past several days.

Rain made an expression befitting of a boy his age for the first time after finishing every last drop of soup and seeing Hawke's smiling narrowed eyes looking over him.

In other words, he had lowered his black eyes in awkward embarrassment.

"...Would you care for seconds? I'm a light eater, so don't mind me."

"No... I..."

"Now, now. Don't say that, just eat. You should listen to your elders."

Hawke took the boy's dish and filled it up with food before the boy could protest. Since

he still had some bread left, he gave Rain some more of that as well.

“You should eat whenever you can. Especially since it seems like your head’s so full of thoughts about your training that you’re putting off eating for later.”

Rain looked a little hesitant at first, but he eventually ended up following Hawke’s advice. It wasn’t because he’d relaxed his guard around the older man, but simply because his hunger had won out.

It must have been agonizing beyond imagination for a boy in the middle of puberty to skip meals. Why was he so obsessed about his sword training that he would go that far? Hawke waited for the boy to finish eating before he candidly asked.

Rain’s answer shocked him.

“It’s not like I was solely focused on sword training or anything. I want to get stronger——that’s really it. At the sword, at martial arts, and at magic.... But still, it hasn’t been easy to find someone to teach me magic.”

Hawke slowly stood up to add more firewood to the humble fireplace and asked again,

“why... do you want to get stronger?”

The boy did not answer at first. He only answered, in a disgruntled manner, after Hawke had returned to his seat and patiently waited a while.

“It has nothing to do with you.”

“I somehow knew you’d say that.”

Hawke leaned back against his chair and smiled faintly. He continued,

“still, while it’s fine to keep honing your skill the way you’ve been doing, you might encounter an opponent that’s out of even your reach one day. I understand that you’ve been through strict training ever since you were very young, but even still.”

“You’re wrong,”

Rain interjected, still sulking.

“Wrong? About what?”

“You’re mistaken. I only started training... during the winter of last year. I’d never had any interest in the sword before that.”

His words shocked Hawke numb.

Hawke moved his hands atop the table like he was swimming and barely managed to confirm in a hoarse voice,

“you mean to say, that it’s barely been a year since you began training?”

Hawke could hardly believe the contents of Rain’s confession. But Rain, the boy in question, tilted his head as if nothing was wrong.

“...It hasn’t even been a year, actually. My old man had me do basic stamina training for over half a year. He only let me hold a sword after that. I built up my explosive power and endurance thanks to his basic training, so I guess I can’t really complain.”

His tone was a little discontent, perhaps because he had his doubts about his father’s training.

However, that wasn’t what Hawke had wanted to confirm.

“So then, it’s only been a few months since you first picked up the sword?”

“...That sounds about right,”

Rain readily nodded.

Surely, what Hawke was feeling was what others would call ‘to be at a complete loss for words.’

Rain scowled and stirred.

“Is it really that surprising? I’ve only trained for a short period of time, sure, but I barely gave myself any time to sleep or anything else during that time either.”

Hawke shook his head multiple times and rejected the boy’s accusations.

“I see... I lost because I was meant to lose. To think that I would meet a warrior overflowing with the most talent that I’ve ever seen, who could even be called the strongest, right at the end of my life.”

After he stopped talking, he deliberately stared at Rain.

The boy looked truly uncomfortable. He looked down at his now-empty plate in sullen silence.

*Perhaps...* Hawke suddenly thought. *This boy might have the same markings as the heroes of the past who have left their name in the land’s history.* To say, ——that is, there existed people of genius ability who could establish their own countries with only their skill with the sword and their wits.

For example, the founder of the Leyfan Empire had been one such hero.

However, the opposite was also just as possible.

There was no guarantee that superior talents would always point to the right direction. There were also cases where it pointed toward the negative.

He could one day be the character who would involve some country, or even the entire continent, in a whirlpool of chaos in the future. Indeed, like how the daemons once had.

In truth, Hawke had already experienced the boy’s genius ability with the sword firsthand with his body, whether he liked it or not.

Should the boy be blessed with cleverness as well on top of everything else... And, should the boy hold ambitions that were greater than the average man’s——

“What’s wrong?”

Rain had raised his head by the time that Hawke had realized. A small shadow of anxiety colored his black eyes. He continued,

“are you feeling unwell?... I don’t think I wounded you...”

“...No, of course you didn’t. It’s nothing, I was simply surprised.”

Hawke returned to his senses and regained his composure.

He was probably over-thinking it. He was probably being a little too vigilant about the gem-like talent before him.

In an effort to change the subject, Hawke pointed at the elaborate hilt of the magic sword resting against the wall.

“By the way, what is the epitaph of that magic sword? Won’t you tell me?”

“It doesn’t have one,”

Rain replied curtly. He continued,

“but, it’s probably still pretty famous, just in a different sense. The sword used to be sealed, after all.”

A cold chill ran down Hawke’s back this time.

Thinking that it could not possibly be true, Hawke jokingly asked,

“don’t tell me that you’re going to say that——you brought that sword out from the ancient ruins deep within the forests of Mount Delado.”

“It makes things simpler if you already know. Yeah, that’s this sword.”

Hawke quietly looked at the magic sword in question. At the Siren’s Blade, which was said to have been sealed at the very ends of hapless fate.

“...What of the guardians? There were supposed to have been countless guardians that were created by mages of the ancient past.”

“Not countless. There was only a couple dozen,”

Rain coolly denied Hawke’s claims. He continued,

“in exchange, those couple dozen guardians kept reviving one after another no matter how many times I defeated them... I see, they were moving because of magic. No

wonder they were immortal.”

“You speak like this had nothing to do with you...”

Hawke furrowed his brows and sighed.

He was about to ask Rain how he had broken past the guardians, but then realized that it was definitely possible for the boy. Or rather, he had actually succeeded and had taken the magic sword out with him.

“To think that there would be a day when I saw the Siren’s Blade of all things with my own eyes.”

Hawke stood up as if dispelling his doubts and pointed at the magic sword.

“...May I take a look?”

“I don’t mind, but... you’d best be careful,”

Rain replied, as if he was telling a riddle.

Hawke took up the sword with doubt still in his heart and pulled it out of its aged scabbard.

The flawless blade reflected the lamplight in a charmingly silver manner.

“——? How strange; the magic sword is missing its magical aura. Hmm?”

Hawke instinctively frowned.

It had only been a simple normal sword when he had first drawn it.

However, the very moment that Hawke had voiced his doubts, the entire sword was suddenly covered in a magical aura as if to reply otherwise.

Now, it clearly sounded the humming that was characteristic to magic swords. In addition, he felt like small electric shocks were running through his hand from the hilt...

“How can this be? It was just a normal sword when I drew it.”



“But it’s functioning properly as a magic sword now, right? You have the ability to draw out the sword’s true power. Well, that much was obvious.”

The boy peered into Hawke’s face and explained, “it’s just something I learned in the ruins,” like an excuse. He continued,

“it seems that the wielder also needs a certain level of ability in order to be able to use that sword as a magic sword. In the hands of anyone deemed unworthy, it won’t function as one, apparently.”

Then, after a moment of hesitation, he added,

“there’s still something else that’s weird. That magic sword seems to absorb its owner’s power. I think that might be why its ranged attack is possible.”

He spoke such eerie words with a solemn countenance.

Hawke knew of the Siren’s Blade’s ranged attack, that is, the “invisible slash,” from the legends, but... He felt that he now truly knew what it meant to be troubled for an answer.

Then, the magic sword, which had been firmly in his grasp, quite literally vanished like smoke.

Just as Hawke was about to voice his questions——

The sword had reappeared just as suddenly as it had disappeared.

...It had transitioned in front of Rain, who was still sitting in his chair, and was floating before the boy without any support.

The boy grasped the magic sword’s hilt as if nothing was out of the ordinary had happened and extended a hand out toward Hawke.

“——The scabbard. As I’d thought, it seems that this sword has chosen me.”

“Chosen?”

When Hawke had handed over the scabbard as asked, Rain readily replied,

“I’d thought that it was just a lie until just now. But apparently, this sword chooses its master of its own accord. It’s set its sights on me. You were able to draw out the sword’s ‘power,’ but you weren’t able to become its master——I think it’s something like that.”

The boy’s face was the very picture of composure.

He was not nervous at all, despite having the most infamous “cursed magic sword” in all of history in his hands.

Hawke’s apprehension finally peaked upon looking back into the boy’s silent eyes.

Even knowing that it was impossible, he still truly wanted to know.

Which side would the boy stand on in the future?

Would he stand as a hero showered by the cheers of the people, or——

Eventually, it was time to turn off the lamps, and Hawke retreated to his bedroom and fell into a light slumber characteristic of the elderly. He was tired after the vigorous exercise he had endured during the evening, so he fell asleep immediately.

However, he woke up in the middle of the night.

He had heard subdued whispering outside of the hut.

*(——? Hmmm, I wonder if they’re here,)*

he thought as he quickly got out of bed. He quickly readied his clothes and armed himself, and left the room and headed for the door. He was off the mark.

When he carefully cracked open the door, he found Rain sitting down on the corner of the porch.

Hawke opened the door wide in relief.

Rain placed a hand on his waist and swiftly turned around.

“...It’s you.”

“I’m the only person living in his hut,”

Hawke gently reminded the boy.

The boy let go of his sword and apologized awkwardly.

“I seem to have woken you up... Sorry.”

“It’s fine. The elderly are light sleepers, after all.”

He idly drew closer and sat down next to Rain. He asked,

“I thought I heard a voice?”

“Oh, I just tried talking to them. I thought that they might reply.”

Hawke knit his eyebrows at what Rain had said.

He slowly surveyed his surroundings, but as far as he could see, he could only see the black branches of the Jura trees.

You would reach the village if you climbed the mountain path a little further, but its residents were likely asleep at this time.

“...I don’t see anyone here,”

Hawke concluded; in turn, Rain doubtfully replied,

“Really? Someone of your caliber can’t feel them? I think you should be able to feel their presence even if you can’t see them.”

“No, I don’t really feel——”

Hawke felt a shiver down his spine the moment he spoke.

This feeling... wasn't bloodlust, but was a presence that emitted a terrifyingly large 'power.' It was similar to the pressure given off by the boy when they had fought...

"Oh? So you *can* feel them. I can even see them. Around there——"

Rain pointed in an unexpected direction,

"there's a woman standing with long hair. No, I should say that she's a girl, based off of her age. Anyway, for some reason, she's started to appear and disappear around me as of late."

Hawke stared at where Rain was pointing for a while, but, unfortunately, he could only see the spreading darkness.

"...I only feel her presence. But even that is rapidly fading."

"I think that's probably because she's hiding her presence on purpose. Though I couldn't tell you why."

Hawke cast his gaze at the dark night for yet another while and then turned back to Rain.

He sounded worried despite himself as he said,

"she's not a ghost or a wraith, is she? She's not trying to harm you in any way?"

"She's not like that,"

Rain said decisively as he shook his head. He continued,

"her presence isn't like that of some sort of formless monster. She's probably a human... or something close to a human, with an actual body somewhere. If anything, I feel like she's been the opposite with me."

The opposite? Did he mean that she was affectionate toward him by that?

However, Rain said nothing more and cut off the conversation. He said,

"well, whatever. It's not like I've been troubled when she's nearby or anything. She eventually gets bored and disappears off to somewhere."

Hawke let out a bittersweet smile at the boy's cheerful words, prompting Rain to ask,

"...what is it?"

"No, I wasn't laughing out of spite. I was just thinking about how you're acting completely fine even after confronting something that would cause any other ordinary human to get cold feet."

"I... guess. It's true that there's nothing in this world that scares me. That's probably why I'm fine even after stuff like this happens."

"Do you not feel fear? Even if, for example, you face certain death before you?"

Rain nodded silently.

Rather, Hawke's intuition told him that the boy seemed to *welcome* 'death,' if anything.

Just what kind of hell had the boy seen in his past...?

Rain stood up next to Hawke, who was deep in thought.

"Let's go to sleep, Hawke. If we stay up too long, we won't be able to sleep at all."

"Ah, yes, you're right..."

Just as Hawke stood up, he had a coughing fit and a sharp pain pierced his chest.

He accidentally staggered because of it.

Rain immediately reached out a hand to support him.

"My apologies. Haha... it's a terrible thing to age. You can no longer trust your own feet."

The boy's visage abruptly clouded over.

Naturally, Hawke's off-handed answer had not been enough to deceive him.

"...This isn't like you. Are you feeling ill somewhere? I thought you were pretty normal when we fought..."

“...I seem to have problems with my chest.”

Hawke had no choice but to confess. He continued,

“nothing happens when I’m feeling fine, but——. Now, you don’t have to look like that. It’s quite all right, it wasn’t too bad this time. I just had a little coughing fit.”

This time, Hawke was successful in his deceit.

They returned back into the hut as Hawke urged the boy forward from behind.

He knew that he was being stubborn... but he did not want the boy to worry in vain after knowing of his condition.

## PART 2

An energetic young girl's voice reverberated throughout the hut where sunlight was filtering through the windows.

"Grandpaa!"

Hawke's eyes opened wide at her florid voice.

He immediately knew who the voice belonged to, of course.

The image of a girl of ten with chestnut colored hair and lovely eyes floated into his mind.

She had apparently come to play again at this early time of day.

"I'll be right there, Hannah!"

he replied and changed his clothes in a hurry.

Upon leaving his room, he found Hannah standing ramrod straight with her eyes open round.

Naturally, Rain stood at the end of her gaze.

She had not expected there to be a boy she had never seen before here, so she was rather surprised.

She was currently frozen in place after opening the door and looking up at Rain while holding her breath with a shocked expression. She was so nervous she looked like she was about to burst out in tears at any moment.

Hawke hurried over and stooped down next to her and introduced Rain.

"There, there Hannah. This young man isn't related to them. I was the one who asked him to stay the night. He's a guest, so relax."

He stood up and looked to Rain next.

He took one look at Rain, who was at a complete loss, and spontaneously burst out

into laughter.

“...What?”

“No, no. It’s nothing.”

Or so he said, but he couldn’t stop laughing.

Evidently, even the genius swordsman could show signs of bashfulness that were appropriate for his age.

“Rain. This child’s name is Hannah. She’s a resident of a neighboring village that’s made up of nothing but woodcutters and hunters. She comes here to play almost every day.”

“...She yours?”

Was Rain trying to ask if she was his granddaughter?

Hawke interpreted it as thus and shook his head.

“No, no, she’s not. She’s simply a neighbor. And a dear friend of mine.”

He placed a hand on top of Hannah’s chestnut colored hair. He had meant to relax her, but her nervousness did not show signs of fading. It was because she had yet to decide if Rain was someone who would become her friend or not.

As if to determine that, she continued to stare hard at Rain with childlike impropriety.

And, Rain, the object of her focus, nodded at Hawke’s reply and returned his gaze to Hannah.

After a bit of hesitation, he knelt down on the floor on one knee with such awkward movements that Hawke had a hard time believing they had been made by the very boy who possessed superior reflexes.

He had a tall figure, so he could not see her eye-to-eye if he did not kneel. There weren’t many who would go out to their way to kneel before a child that they’d never met before, but Rain apparently fell under the minority.



Timidly, he smiled.

He didn't smile the bold smile that he occasionally displayed, but smiled a smile that made onlookers suddenly feel warm in the heart.

Hawke was pleasantly surprised to find that the boy was capable of smiling like that.

Rain ignored Hawke and smoothly extended a hand out to Hanna while still keeping his smile and greeted her, "nice to meet you..."

Then, Hannah, who still looked troubled, said, "... oh," as if she was sighing.

Her cheeks faintly blushed red and she looked at Rain's smile as if she was bewitched. She slowly drew closer and took his hand in both of hers.

"H, hello..."

"It's nice to meet you."

Hawke smiled wryly and shook his head.

"Good grief... It seems that, unbecoming for your age, you're the type who easily attracts women..."

In a moment, Rain pouted again and stood up.

Hawke raised a hand at Rain, who looked like he was about to begin complaining at any minute.

"By the way, Rain. You're here today, so I was thinking of going shopping at the town at the base of the mountain for the first time in a while."

"No, I..."

He had probably meant to say that he was about to set out, but Hannah shyly, while still brimming with expectation, offered to take him somewhere where the scenery was nice before he could, causing him to sullenly hold back.

Hawke had a difficult time reigning in his laughter.

“Then, I’ll leave it to you two. Please look after the place while I’m gone.... You’re okay with this, right, Hannah?”

“...Yeah,”

Hannah shyly replied before Rain could. The boy had no choice but to nod as well.

“Fine... Well, it’s not like I was traveling with a destination in mind anyway.”

“Then I’ll leave the place in your hands. Or so I say, but I won’t be leaving until after breakfast,”

Hawke said, but then he stopped smiling and mysteriously added,

“...it’s a relief that you’re here.”

“What do you mean?”

With Rain’s voice at his back, Hawke went back into his room in order to prepare for breakfast.



Hawke had a lot of places to visit because it had truly been a long time since he had last visited the town at the base of the mountain, so it was considerably late by the time he returned.

When he came close enough to see the hut, he saw Rain and Hannah sitting on two chairs they had brought out to the porch and talking animatedly.

Or rather, Hannah was talking animatedly, and Rain’s stance was to just calmly place interjections here and there.

Hannah was a cheerful girl, but the village she lived in was extremely small and she did not know anyone other than the villagers.... At the very least, that was how it had been until recently.

This, too, was likely the product of the inexplicable charm that the unsociable boy carried. Speaking of which, Hawke, who was not very sociable either, had begun thinking—that he wanted for Rain to stay a little while longer.

“Is something wrong?”

Rain asked, looking up at Hawke.

“No, it’s nothing. That aside, did anything strange happen while I was away?”

“No, nothing.”

As Rain shook his head, Hannah suddenly reported with her eyes sparkling,

“hey, grandpa! I’m gonna take Rain to the waterfall in the woods tomorrow!”

“Oho. That’s nice.”

He shot a glance at Rain as Hannah nodded in assent.

“No... I didn’t mean to impose on you. If you’d prefer, I can camp outside,”

Rain mumbled apologetically.

“What are you saying? Stay for as long as you’d like, and don’t worry about causing me trouble. I was actually about to ask you to stay myself.”

“There’s no way I couldn’t worry about that.... I’ll leave the day after tomorrow——”

Hannah began to tear up in the blink of an eye the moment that Rain said this.

“Rain, you’re not gonna stay with Grandpa forever? You’re going away somewhere?”

The boy became visibly flustered when Hannah started crying.

His bewilderment was that of a normal boy’s, and did not make him seem like the unparalleled swordsman that he was.

Hawke felt that he had finally caught a glimpse of the boy’s true nature.

However, the short-lived boyish expression left Rain’s face and his black eyes began to sharpen.

He drew his magic sword in his hands closer and stood up.

“You have guests, Hawke. I see, so this is what you meant by ‘them.’”

“——Hmm. But I don’t...”

Hawke felt it as he spoke.

A group of people boiling over in bloodlust was climbing up the mountain path.

Nevertheless... the lag between the time that Rain and he had felt their presences likely demonstrated the difference between their respective abilities.

That was what Hawke thought, at least, as he sighed bitterly.

“Good gracious...”

He threw his luggage on the porch and stood up with his hand on the sword at his waist. Rain left his seat as well, as if he had been pulled along.

“What’s the situation?”

“There’s a group of petty scoundrels at the town at the base of the mountain. They’re an organization small enough not to catch the attention of any actual guilds. But, on the other hand, they don’t have the same amount of regulations as a guild would, so they play rather dirty.... They’re trying to take money from the village on top of this mountain under the pretense of collecting protection fees.”

“I see, I get it now. They came here before, and you chased them away, right?”

When Rain guessed what had happened, Hawke spread out both of his hands for the boy to see.

“I’m a bit of a hermit, so I try not to stick my nose into other people’s businesses. But, the villagers from up the mountain have been kind to me, you see. Besides, the people who live there live very frugal lives, and they don’t have even a single taran to spare. They had no choice but to refuse.”

“Hmmm... that’s a pretty easy story to understand,”

Rain replied indifferently. Then, just as easily, he proposed,

“shall I kick them out for you, in place of lodging fees?”

“Indeed. You’d be able to take ten or twenty of those ruffians without breaking a sweat.”

Hawke pat the boy’s short-trimmed hair and abruptly laughed. He continued,

“but, I’d like to settle this with words if at all possible. I’d welcome your assistance if it came down to that, but I’d like you to refrain from hurting them too badly.”

“Why!?”

Rain cried out in a surprisingly harsh manner and glared at Hawke. He continued,

“why do you want to hold back against scum like that? If it were me——”

“Rain.”

While bewildered by the normally cool-headed boy’s violent rage, Hawke strongly restrained him with both his eyes and his words.

“...I don’t know why you’re so angry, but reign it in for now. You’re scaring Hannah.”

Rain immediately extinguished his anger, shook his head, and returned to the composed expression that he had worn before.

He knelt down and placed a hand on Hannah’s, whose eyes were wide open in surprise, cheek.

“...Sorry for surprising you. I didn’t mean to scare you, Hannah.”

Hannah smiled in relief.

At the same time, Hawke spotted the group coming up the mountain path.

“It seems that they’re here.”

Indeed, it was just as Hawke had said.

None of the members had been the same ones who had visited him earlier, but they were undoubtedly members of Virgo.

They came in a drove of over ten people, and each and every one of them had a scary-looking face and emitted a presence which suggested that they threatened people on a daily basis.

Hannah hurriedly grabbed on to Rain's leg.

Rain pat the girl's head and kindly said,

"it's alright. It'll be over soon."

"...Really? Neither of you'll get hurt?"

"Neither of us will get hurt facing the likes of them."

The boy exchanged looks with Hawke and smiled wryly.

Indeed, Rain aside, even Hawke knew that he would not fall behind the likes of them.

Hawke exchanged another look with Rain and left the porch as if he was shielding Hannah from them.

As he did, they had veered away from the mountain path and were swaggering their way over.

They spread out as they caught sight of Hawke's group. They at least seemed to be better prepared than the previous group that Hawke had fought... Many of them were carrying bows this time.

There were fifteen of them in total.

"I do quite believe that we've already talked about this matter before?"

Hawke took the initiative and broke the ice as the men silently glared at him.

The most atrocious-looking one of the bunch spat at his feet.

He looked like he was the leader of the group, and he frowned heavily as he replied,

“quit blabbering in your sleep, old man. Listen here, if we let anyone who dares oppose us off easy, others will start thinking we’re pushovers too. How are we supposed to do business if we let that happen, huh?!”

*How is any of what you’re doing considered business?*

Hawke wanted to retort.

As he was fretting about how he should go about persuading them, Rain cut in from the side, saying,

“hey, Hawke. Do they not know about you? Or did they come all the way here even despite knowing, just to get beaten up?”

“...Who can say? I’d think that they don’t know about me. It’s not as if I carry around a sign detailing my personal history on my back,”

Hawke replied without delay and looked to Rain.

The boy had long since released his tension and looked truly disappointed as the chagrin failed to clear away from his face, as if he had been expecting to chase down great, ferocious prey but was met only with a simple rat during the hunt.

“I see... They don’t know anything, and they don’t feel anything even after looking at you. I wasn’t any different from them a year ago. It disgusts me just thinking about that. I really don’t want to become some pathetic yelping dog with all bark and no bite...”

he said heartily in earnest.

A faint, but cold, smile was carved upon the edges of his lips as he looked down upon and glared at the men.

*“And by pathetic yelping dogs, I meant you guys, you know?”*

It was obvious to everyone present that that was what he had actually wanted to say.

Naturally, the men were furious.

“Hey, brat!”

the sturdy man who first replied to Hawke called out in a low voice.

If you looked carefully, there was a scar on his chin that he was touching subconsciously.

“I was gonna let you off ‘cause you’re just a kid and all, but you’ve just changed my mind.”

He twisted his lips into a scowl and waved at one of his comrades. He continued,

“hey, Bessie! It’s time for work. We were gonna use it on the old man, but I don’t care. This brat just said he liked dogs. Why don’t you indulge him a bit?”

Then, he turned back to Rain and snickered.

“You’re gonna regret this, brat. Try not to wet yourself ‘cause you’re scared... If you even can, that is.”

“Unfortunately, I forgot that feeling. And your face is so ugly that I’m too busy trying not to laugh to be scared,”

Rain replied calmly, making his opponent grind his teeth in detest.

Then, Rain crossed his arms and looked over to the guy named Bessie. Evidently, the boy was interested in what the men were planning to do.

Hawke, who had been content to play the bystander, finally began to feel a little bit of danger.

The man called Bessie, who had narrow eyes and hollow cheeks, moved around his hands as if he was drawing sigils in the air.

At first, Hawke had thought that the man was a mage... but his spell suggested otherwise.

Could he possibly be——



“...A summoner! To think that one existed in a countryside town like Teto!”

It was too late to try and persuade them now.

Hawke made his decision at once and attempted to draw his sword.

However, he was stopped by Rain.

“This is my first time seeing a summoner. I want to see what he summons.”

“Daring, aren’t you...”

Contrary to what his words may have suggested, Hawke let go of his sword’s hilt.

There would be no problem regardless of what was summoned as long as the two of them were here, and he was interested in seeing the boy fight.

A shining white magic circle appeared beneath Bessie in the sunset glow as he chanted his incantation in a mournfully low voice and moved his arms as he had been taught. His comrades quick~ly stepped away from the gloomy summoner.

Bessie’s spell was completed before long, and a ferocious howl suddenly cried out from the magic circle.

Everyone present, save Rain, jumped a little at the sound. In the next moment, something jet black smoothly rose up from the circle.

Two sharp ears appeared first, and then a large body covered in a purplish aura slowly rose up after it. It was easily three times as big as a timber wolf.

When it fully manifested inside of the magic circle, it bared its row of fangs and growled a low growl... *grrr*.

Its scarlet eyes, reminiscent of that of a dragon’s, glowered at Hawke and Rain.

Hawke promptly placed a hand on the sword at his waist.

“——! A dog from Hades, a hellhound!”

“What is that? Was it really summoned from Hades?”

Rain asked in a completely unaffected tone.

Even the enemy men were unable to fully hide their fear, but the boy's face did not change in the slightest.

"No, I doubt it. Not to say that it's not possible, but I doubt that our summoner is strong enough to do it. It's a type of monster. I don't know if it really lives in Hades, but that's what people have been saying since ages past. More realistically speaking, it's a species of monster that can be found in tall mountainous areas."

—*They attack travelers often, and devour even their bones,*

Hawke added as he relaxed his shoulders and simply sighed.

"...What, so it wasn't actually summoned from Hades? That's a bummer."

Rain took his hand away from Hannah, who was at his feet, and pushed her in Hawke's direction, saying,

"take care of Hannah."

"I will. Be careful."

"Rain! Y, you can't fight something so huge!"

Rain simply smiled gently at Hannah as the young girl began to tear up, fearing for his safety. She immediately stopped trembling, as if she had been enchanted.

Apparently, the boy carried some sort of mysterious charm that spread to Hawke as well. As proof, Hawke had begun thinking that everything would work out well if it left things to Rain.

Then, the hellhound suddenly roared.

It roared a howl so fierce that it perturbed the listeners' insides, causing everyone to take a step back.

Except for Rain, who remained so calm and upright that it was almost arrogant.

A hellhound's howl had the effect of stealing one's life force and evoking instinctive fear, but it didn't seem to work on the boy.

The mythical canine, which had cast a green aura upon its entire body, had apparently finished its pre-battle evaluations, and was now baring its sharp fangs at Rain's direction.

It had determined that Rain was a far 'stronger enemy' than Hawke. After all, it was a monster, which, unlike humans, was sensitive to 'surges of power.' Its judgement on that front was always correct.

Hawke looked to the sky... *well, it's only natural.*

Rain, on the other hand, looked almost serene as he silently stared at the hellhound just a few meters away from him.

Then, he called out to it in a low and collected voice.

"I'm ready whenever. Come at me? Are you strong, black dog?"

Are you strong enough to stop me?"

The boy stopped talking and leisurely took a step forward.

He had yet to draw his magic sword.

"Or, are you strong enough to kill me? You can try, if that's the case. Come defeat me if you can!"

The boy had yelled his last few words in sharp rebuke. *No... could that have been... his wish?*

At the same time, a gigantic wave of power violently burst out from Rain's scrawny figure. Hawke could see the intangible aura literally cover Rain's entire body.

While they could not see it nearly as clearly as Hawke had, even the outlaws appeared to have felt something.

They looked amongst each other with ashen faces.

“Well, what’s wrong?! If you’re not coming, I’ll go to you!”

Rain declared for good measure.

And then, he took another small step forward.

It had a dramatic effect on the hellhound, the mythical canine.

The monster, which was sensitive to ‘power,’ could not possibly ignore the enormous surge of pressure that caused even humans to tremble. The infamous mythical canine could not even growl, let alone howl. It lowered its posture, collapsed its ears back, and tucked its tail, which was covered in sharp bristles, between its legs.

Its scarlet eyes, which had been glaring daggers until just then, were now avoiding Rain completely.

It had already been frightened before the fight had begun, and now it was already in a state of surrender.

“What’s wrong with you?! Hurry up and attack! Rip him to pieces!”

Irritated by the mythical canine’s attitude, the gloomy summoner chanted a command word and waved his twisted wand. However, the canine’s fear of Rain had won out against the binding force of the summoner’s spell.

With a hint of disappointment in his face, Rain took another step forward.

Finally, the ferocious mythical canine had been completely reduced to an underdog.

In other words, it had turned its large figure around and had run away. It completely ignored the summoner as he tried to pull the beast back and scampered back into the magic circle in a panic.

Just like that, it quickly vanished. It had fled to where it had originally come from.

It had felt the pressure that the boy had released and discerned that it had absolutely no chance of winning. However, unlike Hawke, who had a long military history, the outlaws did not know this. They had watched the mythical canine flee in dumbfound

amazement, but became furious all at once when the hellhound had vanished, magic circle and all.

“The fuck was that?! Bring out something that actually gets the job done!”

“You bastard, we paid you good money, so what the hell was that about?!”

The summoner, who was receiving complaints left and right, shook his head because he had no idea what was going on.

“Th, this wasn’t supposed to... Hellhounds are bloodthirsty monsters that like the taste of human flesh. I can’t believe it just ran off like that. And it was bound to my spell, too.”

“Then why the hell did it run away like a coward!?”

The summoner let out a feeble scream as the leader, with the scar on his cheek, grabbed him by the collar.

“I, I don’t know either, ZANJI. It might have been because that brat’s stronger than we think. Strong enough that the hellhound chose not to fight him——”

The man called ZANJI was not pleased.

“You think you’re being funny?! We’ll be having a nice, long chat after this... And I’ll have you return the money we paid you up front too!”

He was a rather petty man.

As Hawke watched over them in delight, Hannah, who had finally regained her vigor, pulled at the hem of his shirt.

“Hey, grandpa. Why did the big dog run away?”

“It’s simple, Hannah. It knew that it couldn’t beat Rain, so it prioritized its own safety. It was a matter of its life or death, so the spell’s binding power couldn’t hold it back——that’s why.”

“Huh... Rain’s really strong...”

Zanji was quick to start grumbling, almost as if he was jealous of the admiration in the girl's eyes.

"Hey, old fart! Stop spewing out nonsense while looking so happy for yourself! D'ja really think that we'd just up and run away 'cause of that bluff of yours?!"

"No, not really,"

Hawke calmly refuted. He continued,

"but I *did* think that you could really learn a thing or two from that hellhound. Well, I'm sure my warning falls on deaf ears."

"Course it does, you goddamned fool!"

Zanji replied without missing a beat while baring his uneven teeth and raised an arm.

"Ready your bows! Listen up, aim for that brat first. We'll spit all over his corpse later!"

Following his command, about six people with bows nocked their arrows and aimed at the boy a few meters in front of them.

They maintained a stance that would allow them to fire at a moment's notice and awaited Zanji's next orders.

Rain, however, did not move to guard himself, but simply smiled at them wickedly.

"I thought it was strange that so many of you had bows when I first saw you guys——. Is this how it is? Hawke beat you guys up in a straight sword fight before, so this time you thought to use ranged attacks? Did you think that arrows would get the job done somehow? Pft, you brainless idiots are the epitome of shallow thinking. You're so stupid that I think I might actually start crying..."

Deep wrinkles burrowed between Zanji and his crew's brows as the boy quipped at them mercilessly.

Zanji spat and yelled,

"kill that fucking braaat!"

“Rain!”

The sound of arrows cutting through wind merged into Hannah’s heartbroken scream. As they did, Rain’s hand blurred slightly.

“How’s that, huh——”

Zanji froze up mid-sentence. With his mouth still wide open.

Rain was standing up, as unharmed as he was before, before him.

However, there were arrows in between the fingers of both of his hands.

He had easily caught all of the arrows that had come flying at him all at once with his bare hands.

The boy did not even look particularly proud of himself as he tossed the arrows, his prizes of battle, aside.

“...Arrows are too slow for me or Hawke. You’re wasting arrows.”

“No, I can’t stop them as cleanly as you do.”

Naturally, it was Hawke who had interjected with a smile. Rain looked to him and Hannah and flashed a smile.

——In the next moment, his smile vanished as he turned back to his enemies and kicked the earth as he dashed toward them at lightning speed.

The wind whistled, and Rain quite literally made a sudden appearance before Zanji’s eyes.

He twisted his body as he approached his enemy and spun his left leg to kick Zanji squarely in the chin.

The squalid man spat out fragments of his shattered teeth and droplets of blood as he fell back heavily into his comrades behind him. His life wasn’t in danger... but he would probably have to stick to eating soft foods for a while.

A shiver broke out among the men as they lay witness to Zanji’s unsightly state.

“B, bows, ready your bows! Shoot him again!”

Someone shouted in the lieu of their tragically fallen leader, and a few people loosened their arrows once more.

Rain drew his sword this time.

The bluish magic sword danced, rending the darkness, leaving faint traces of light to the left and right. Piles of ruined arrows, cut cleanly in two, piled up one after another by his feet.

The boy had caught the arrows precisely as they flew at him and had bisected each and every one with his magic sword. Not a single arrow could reach, let alone harm, his slender figure.

“They’re too slow! I already told you this was pointless!”

Rain looked disappointed, as if he was about to click his tongue at them at any moment.

The enemy had stopped firing arrows at some point. They looked back at Rain without a word.

No one tried to draw their swords in a new display of hostility.

Rain, who was loosely holding on to his magic sword, quietly asked,

“——and? Are you done already?”

No one answered.

Rain surveyed through their numbers and suddenly brought up his magic sword diagonally up into the air. Then, he brought it down in a sharp diagonal slash with perfect form.

In Hawke’s eyes, it had looked like the very space itself had been bisected by the magic sword’s trail of light for a moment.

What actually happened was made clear soon enough.



The moment that the magic sword had been swung down, a portion of the earth before the men's eyes was split open, stirring up a cloud of dust.

A large fissure had been carved into the earth by the feet of the men in the front of the group. In a long, straight line.

The Siren's Blade's "invisible slash," which had been passed down the ancient legends alongside fear, had been activated.

The infamous ranged attack, which had shaken the capital of the ancient kingdom of Celestia, had crossed the span of a thousand years and was brought before their very eyes.

Naturally, the men realized the identity of the magic sword in the boy's hands.

Their legs gave out and the blood drained from their faces.

"A, a ranged attack..."

the summoner, who had been long since forgotten, moaned silently, and the few men who were supporting their knocked-out leader began to speak out one after another.

"The cursed blade... Wasn't it supposed to be sealed away?!"

"Th, that's what I heard. It was sealed away deep in some mountains somewhere, and no one's seen it for the past several hundred years, or something like that——"

As they were protesting, Rain simply pointed the tip of his magic sword in the direction of the town and curtly commanded,

"leave!"

He hadn't yelled at them or anything, but the men reacted as if something had kicked them in the ass.

They were so desperate not to worsen the boy's mood that if he had commanded them to start singing, they would have done so immediately.

"——Hey. Don't forget the fatty on the ground over there. You'll bother Hawke if he ends up freezing to death!"

At Rain's rebuke, the men who were in the middle of running away flew right back around.

"O, okay. We got it, so please put away your sword!"

Someone answered on the verge of tears, and a few men collected their sprawled-out leader in a panic. Then, they simply ran away in spectacular fashion. They ran down the mountain path with their feelings laid bare——that every single one of them was trying to flee as fast as they possibly could.

Rain, looking sullen and displeased, did not look away from them until they had completely disappeared from his field of view.

However, when Hannah happily drew closer, he blinked his black eyes, as if he was waking up from a dream, and looked down at the girl with a troubled expression.

## PART 3

Rain, who had definitely meant to leave soon, had actually ended up staying at Hawke's place ever since that day.

There were several reasons for his stay, but the biggest was because of Hannah's wishes. Whenever Rain mentioned or made to leave, the girl would slowly begin tearing up without fail and grabbed onto the hem of Rain's clothes and refused to let go.

"Hey, listen, grandpa."

After spending most of the free time that her mother had allowed her with Rain, Hannah talked only of the boy with Hawke even during lunch.

"When I told Rain that I lost the pendant that Mama gave me in the woods, Rain said he'd find it for me, and he looked for it all day! And then, he walked all around the woods until dinner and he finally found it!"

"Did he now... isn't that nice? Did you make sure to thank him, Hannah?"

"Yeah!"

As she nodded cheerfully, her cheeks flushed slightly and her black eyes sparkled radiantly, just like how the maidens who had once fallen in love with the legendary hero, "Joe Jervael," had.

Rain was as kind to Hannah as he had always been, but his bewilderment seemed to grow day after day.

*Isn't it nice that the two of you are getting along so well?...* Rain hadn't played along even when Hawke had teased him thus.

*"I don't have that right,"*

was the sullen boy's only answer, and he refused to tell Hawke the reasons behind it.

Hawke had had many opportunities to catch a glimpse of Rain's hidden side while living with the unsociable boy.

For instance——

The boy evidently suffered from frequent nightmares all night long. The reason that he had been outside on his first night at the hut, other than because of the mysterious presence, was because he had woken from a bad dream.

Hawke was certain that he jolted up almost every night covered in sweat because of a nightmare.

The bold boy with a genius sense for battle must have experienced something terrible in his past.

Once, through his window, Hawke had seen Rain sitting outside after waking up from one of his nightmares——

As unbelievable as it was, Rain had been trembling. The boy, who had claimed not to be able to feel fear, had wrapped his arms around his body, clearly terrified of something.

Hawke had rushed outside at once, fearing that some kind of outrageous monster had attacked, but Rain had simply shaken his head in awkward embarrassment.

*"No... this is because I was remembering something that happened in the past. I said that I don't feel fear, but this is the only exception,"*

the normally detached boy had mumbled with his dark eyes to the ground, as if he was embarrassed that Hawke had seen him.

Raid hadn't said anything else when Hawke had gently urged him on, but... he had simply added,

*"I'm in the deepest reaches of Hades even as I'm alive.... The scene that I once saw long ago won't leave my head."*

He had no idea what had happened to the boy. He could make a decent guess, but Hawke purposefully did not ask any further.

In any event, a severe experience from his past had instilled something extreme within the boy and had completely changed the course of his life.

*"I want to become stronger than anyone else,"*

he had heard the boy whisper multiple times, and Hawke was sure that the boy's wish wasn't unrelated to his past experiences.

——Hawke had once talked with the boy about the latter's obsession at the table.

By that time, the cool and unsociable boy had begun to make idle chat with Hawke.

It was then that Hawke had warned him,

"strength is relative. No matter how strong you get, there'll always be someone stronger. Power is destined to be destroyed by a stronger power. This is a bit of an extreme example, but no matter how strong a person gets, it's impossible for them to defeat the strongest mythical beast... a dragon, no?"

The boy had stared at Hawke and declared,

"I think otherwise, Hawke. The title of being the 'strongest' is only given to a special someone——or something. If a dragon is the strongest being there is, I'll take it down."

...The boy was thinking something that no normal person would ever think. And seriously, too.

It wasn't even as if his goal was to become a legendary Dragon Slayer, which was said to be granted superhuman strength, but——. At this rate, he would seriously challenge a dragon one day. Was the reason that he was searching for a magic teacher, aside from simply seeking even more power, because he was preparing himself for that day?

Hawke had never been as worried about the skinny boy's future as he had been then.

The boy carried a pure and serene heart that forever captivated Hawke and Hannah, but in the deepest depths of that very same heart, he hid away something so truly fervent.

In truth, Hawke had a friend who could be called the strongest rune master in history.

If Rain was a genius of the sword and martial arts, his friend was a genius of the now-lost secret arts of what people called “magic.”

However, Hawke was still hesitant. Should he introduce the boy to his friend or not...

Rain would surely learn magic in no time at all. Hawke was sure of it. Hawke predicted that the boy would grow even stronger, just as he wished.

However, Hawke remembered something that he had personally experienced——

The stronger a person grew, the lonelier they became.

He did not wish for the boy to walk the path of solitude.

That was why Hawke was hesitant. If possible, he wished for the boy to live out a normal, peaceful life...

The boy wasn't all talk, and he silently continued to train himself.

When he wasn't playing with Hannah or helping Hawke by cutting firewood and doing other chores... he spent the entirety of his free time training. At full strength, at that.

It went without saying that his practice swings were something that no other swordsman could possibly execute, but the boy had also devised a way of training that no one would have ever thought of, or would never have attempted even if they had.

Hawke had witnessed him do ‘just that’ deep in the woods.

He had stumbled upon it by chance upon being lured over by a strange noise he had heard while he was gathering firewood.

The boy was standing at the bottom of a cliff covered with boulders and had destroyed the earth above his head using his magic sword's ranged attack.

Naturally, large clumps of rock came falling down upon him like a torrential downpour.

He was evading them one after another.

A heat haze-like afterimage formed behind him as he slipped through the spaces between the rocks.

It looked like he was training to improve his reflexes and defensive body movements... but his methods were too dangerous.

Even Rain, with his superior reflexes, could eventually get hurt badly if he continued training like that. Rather, he had already gotten injured. When they had bathed together, Hawke had seen that the boy's slender figure was covered in cuts and bruises.

Ultimately, however, Hawke kept his mouth shut.

He knew that the boy would not stop even if he admonished him.

Just like Hawke himself hadn't in his younger days——

Just as he himself hadn't in the past, Rain would not be choosing for a peaceful and uneventful life any time soon. He would continue to seek out strong foes and fight them one after another.

When Hawke had asked him about it, Rain had told him about the opponents he wished to seek in battle while counting them on his fingers.

All of the names that he had listed belonged to warriors who were the best among the best.

Not only that, while mercenary warriors such as Zagan and Roy were one thing, the boy also planned on challenging knights——including even Joe Lamberck, the

‘Fearless God-General’ of Chandrys.

Rain was certainly an unparalleled genius swordsman... but to challenge that man the way he was now——

Having reached a point where he could do little else, Hawke made up his mind.

He would not admonish the boy, but would aggressively lend him his strength——indeed, that was what Hawke had resolved to do.

It was true that he was worried for the boy.

However, there had been a time when Hawke himself had once wholeheartedly pursued the ‘ultimate strength.’ There had certainly been a time when he had single-mindedly endeavored to reach the furthest peak.

The reason that he had not stopped the boy from continuing his life-threatening training was because a part of him had sympathized with Rain as a swordsman.

Hawke immediately told Rain about his friend the very night that he had made up his mind.

The boy slammed down the bowl of soup on the table and hurriedly asked,

“really? Are you sure that this friend of yours is a first-rate mage warrior?”

“Not only are they first-rate——”

Hawke recalled his friend and shook his head,

“but I think they’re probably the strongest rune master in history.”

Rain jumped up, as he had expected.

It seemed that Hawke’s words had roused him.

“Please introduce me to them!”



“That’s what I plan to do... but there are a few things I’d like to warn you about first,”

Hawke said honestly, now that he had the chance. He continued,

“this friend of mine is female. Also, strictly speaking, she’s not human.”

“I don’t mind. I have no problems as long as she’ll teach me magic.”

Rain’s expression did not change.

He was completely calm even after being told that Hawke’s friend was not human.

Feeling a little relieved, Hawke revealed an even larger secret.

“Even if she’s a vampire?”

Even Rain blinked his black eyes upon hearing that.

However, he had not flinched. He simply looked as if he had heard something strange.

“I don’t mind, but——. Unfortunately, I don’t intend on having my blood sucked and being forced into subordination. If I feel like I’m in danger, I might turn my sword on her even if she’s your friend. Are you okay with that?”

Having heard the boy’s extremely serious answer, Hawke burst out into laughter before he could catch himself.

“Hahaha! ——Do excuse me. But relax. She’s not the type of person to drink the blood of someone unwilling to give it,”

Hawke firmly assured the boy. He continued,

“besides, she’s capable of eating normal food. I believe that she usually follows a very normal diet. The only problem is whether or not she’ll like you enough to teach you magic.”

“...Is she hard to please?”

“Well, I think she might be just as bad at interacting with people as you are.”

Rain frowned heavily when Hawke had said that.

Hawke's smile broadened upon seeing the boy's face and he crossed his arms in a relaxed manner.

"I didn't mean to tease you, so I'll apologize if I've dampened your mood. In any case, the rest is up to you. I'll send her a letter of introduction at once..."

Just as Hawke had said he would, he had written and sent her a letter about Rain the very next day.

He had thought that the boy would use this chance to leave his side.

To the contrary, Rain continued to stay under Hawke's care.

By and large, there were two reasons behind this, and one of them was naturally Hannah. It was plainly obvious that she would be deeply saddened, so as always, Rain kept his eventual departure a secret from her.

The pure and cheerful girl grew to adore Rain evermore as they spent day after day with each other, and she had finally begun to think about the future.

Even Hawke had been reluctant to answer her immediately when she had asked him to teach her sword skills.

"Why sword skills? You weren't interested in them at all until now, were you?"

"Nope, not until now."

Hannah opened her bright and large eyes wide and nodded with a serious expression on her face.

Then, with an equally sincere look in her eyes, she said,

"but I have to be able to fight too if I want to go traveling with Rain... Right now, I'd only be a bother to him."

Hawke was surprised.

The girl seriously wished to stay by Rain's side forever. He perceived this for the first time upon peering into her eyes, brimming with deep resolve.

He brought to attention that she had not asked Rain's opinion on the matter, and kept it a secret from the boy.

If Rain had known about this, he would have left Hawke's side that very day.

He was not the type of boy to involve others in the danger and struggle that he always carried with him.

And the other reason.

There was another reason why Rain was so hesitant to leave.

That reason was Hawke himself.

Hawke's condition deteriorated as the winter grew colder. He began to have more coughing fits, and he would sometimes cough so hard that he would spit out a little bit of blood.

Hawke had also started to go outside less often, and he began to stay closed off in his room reading all day long.

It went without saying that he was in no state to teach Hannah sword skills.

Fortunately for Hawke, Rain wasn't one to meddle excessively in other people's affairs, but even Rain had, albeit nonchalantly, pointed it out when Hawke began to skip meals with greater frequency.

When the boy had realized he was falling on deaf ears, he began to advise Hawke to consult either a pharmacist or a doctor with fervor.

On the outside, the boy was technically taking the stance of someone trying to repay his debt to Hawke.

However, he was not yet experienced enough to be able to successfully hide his true intentions, and his true feelings on the matter were readily evident to Hawke's eyes.

When the boy finally looked like he would physically drag Hawke to the doctor's if he had to, Hawke resigned himself.

He had planned to keep silent about it until the very end, but there was no helping it now. He had no choice but to confess.

Looking at the boy face to face across the table for the first time in a while, he came clean.

In the most indifferent manner he could while drinking his coffee so as not to fill the air with a sense of tragedy.

"...This hut is actually the place where I've decided to die. I've been living here for that purpose."

Understanding and sorrow filled the boy's face the moment the words had left Hawke's mouth.

It had only been for an extremely brief moment, and the boy had returned to his usual cool expression soon afterward, but the slight change in his face had not escaped Hawke's notice.

That simple explanation had been enough for the clever boy. Besides, he had anticipated Hawke's situation to a degree, and peppered him with several appropriate questions.

"...Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure that you won't recover? Have you tried a different doctor?"

"You're sharp,"

Hawke said with a wry smile as he shook his head. He continued,

"no——. I may be calm now, but I struggled a lot more than you can imagine at first. I tried many different doctors and pharmacists, and I even tried magic. But... it was all for naught. Rather than anything to do with the illness itself, I've reached the end of my lifespan. It's time for me to face something that everyone must face one day,"

Hawke explained in an easy to digest manner as he slid in a small lie. Then, he said,

“I can see that my time is up. I’m sure that I will die soon...”

Rain did not ask any further questions.

Instead, he simply lowered his black eyes and whispered, “I see.”

He offered no sickly-sweet words of sympathy or compassion.

...Though he was not quite able to hide his deep sorrow as well as he thought he was...

*He’s a kind child*, thought Hawke.

But, ironically, he had been born with an extremely rare talent as a warrior. Would that fact work to bring the boy to a future that was good for him?

At the time, Hawke was more worried about Rain’s future than he was about his own death, which he had already resolved himself for.

Afterward, to Hawke’s great perplexity, Rain stopped showing signs of wanting to leave.

As Hawke began to spend more time in his bed, the boy began to take care of cooking and other menial chores. It was difficult to tell who was really the guest anymore.

It appeared had Hawke had been hasty in thinking that Rain had made peace with Hawke’s impending death, as the boy apparently had not given up on the hope that Hawke would get better. Or, instead, he had possibly resolved himself to take care of Hawke as he lay on his death bed.

In any case——

Hawke felt that it was about time.

He was happier for the boy’s feelings than he could put into words, but Hawke was still set on facing his death alone.

To his own surprise, he was more reluctant to part with the boy than he had thought, and, to be honest, he was lonely. However, he had no other choice at this point.

Hawke made a few preparations the next morning.

Gathering what little strength he still had left, he made use of the training he had undergone long ago and enhanced every last corner of his weakened constitution with Ekseed... in other words, with 'Ki.'

He was able to feign healthiness by doing so. It was something similar to the way rune masters enhanced the mana in their bodies when commanding magic.

However, while it was one thing to do this while being healthy, he would be hit with a sudden recoil later after doing this while disease-ridden. Still, Hawke had nothing to lose even if it meant that he would whittle down what little time he had left.

And so, Hawke got up early in the morning for the first time in a while and prepared breakfast like he had before.

Rain's, who had been practicing with his sword since before dawn despite how cold it was, black eyes opened wide as he returned inside. Then, for a moment, he smiled an unclouded smile. For that brief moment, he did not look like a warrior, but like any other boy his age.

He promptly returned to looking unsociable as per usual, but Hawke's chest had hurt a little upon seeing the boy smile.

However, his resolve had not changed.

Hawke immediately began conversation after breakfast.

"I know this is sudden——. But won't you resume your journey soon?"

Hawke raised a hand at the boy who abruptly looked up and looked back at him with a serious look on his face. He continued,

“you’re the type of person who overthinks things, so let me say this first. ——I’m not saying this because I can’t afford to feed you or because I’ve started to find you annoying or anything along those lines.”

“...Then why?”

“You’re not planning on staying here forever, are you? My health has taken a turn for the better, so I thought that now was as good a time to ask as any.”

“Hawke, you’re still underestimating me,”

Rain said slowly without taking his eyes off of Hawke. He continued,

“I see, when I saw you earlier, I thought that you had recovered for a moment. But that’s not the case. You’re deceiving my eyes with some kind of power. I have no idea what kind of ability it is that you’re using right now, but I’m sure I’m not wrong. You’re probably only going to be well for the time being, no?”

Hawke was astonished.

The boy was able to feel the wave of power and ‘Ki’ of experienced warriors without having been taught how to do so.

That alone was surprising, but he had also realized how Hawke had applied the ‘Ki’ at his disposal.

Hawke could only admit that he had likely still been underestimating the boy.

“Goodness.... Then let me be frank. Just as you’ve deduced, I have not truly recovered. I’ve simply tricked you by enhancing my ‘Ki’ for the time being. In truth, my condition will worsen from here on out.”

Hawke stopped Rain, who looked like he wanted to say something, and continued,

“eventually, I’ll become unable to move from my bed, and I may not even be able to relieve myself alone.”

“So what?”

Rain shot back angrily. He continued,

“there’s nothing to be ashamed of if it’s because your body weakened. That’s not enough of a reason to drive me out.”

“Then, are you saying that you’d take care of me if I get to that point?”

Rain nodded honestly as Hawke smiled wearily.

“I still have a debt to repay you for. And besides, it’s not like the guys from before have given up yet.”

“I’m happy for your feelings... Thank you. But I think you’ve taught Virgo a lesson that’s stuck. They haven’t shown up ever since.”

“You don’t understand. Scum like that——”

Hawke cut Rain off, saying,

“let us cut our ties here. I have two reasons for this.”

“What!?”

“I can’t bear it, even if you can. Think about it. If you were in my shoes, would you be able to meekly accept someone else’s care? All while knowing that you’re beyond help?”

Rain did not answer.

But his anger died down little by little.

His silence was basically his answer, but Hawke knew that it would take more than that for the boy to back down.

With little other choice, Hawke brought up something that he had intended to keep quiet.

“Also... there’s a matter regarding Hannah.”

The boy knit his brows and silently prompted Hawke to speak.

Rain’s countenance changed visibly when Hawke told him about Hannah’s words of



resolve.

Rain was more shocked than Hawke had anticipated and his initial anger evaporated at once.

A long silence fell between them.

The boy kept his eyes lowered and thought for a while before finally raising his head in silence.

“You’re right. I’ve overstayed my visit. I should never have gotten that child involved...”

Hawke didn’t reply.

It would have been easy to deny it, but doing so would have only amounted to hypocrisy.

Rain looked directly at Hawke with unclouded eyes and, for once, spoke with emotion.

He said but a single sentence:

“...Thank you for everything.”

The boy acted quickly once he had made the decision to leave.

He drank the rest of his coffee in one gulp and stood up.

The sun had only just started to rise, so Hawke was surprised by the boy’s hurry.

Evidently, the matter about Hannah had affected him quite heavily. He seemed to firmly believe that—anyone who was with him would inevitably be led to unhappiness.

In any event, he put on the jacket he had hung up on the wall and left his seat.

He opened the door and left looking exactly the same as he had when he had first arrived at the hut about twenty days ago.

He acted astonishingly quickly now that he had made his decision.

Surprised, Hawke chased after him and called after the back of the boy who had already begun waking toward the mountain path.

“Rain!”

The boy turned around and looked to Hawke, who was standing on the porch.

“What?”

——Hawke was troubled.

There should have had been something that he had wanted to say.

But he could not rid himself of the feeling that he had forgotten something.

Of this he was certain.

“...Hannah is helping out her mother right now, so you can still take it easy for a while.”

Unable to recall of what he had forgotten, Hawke said something meaningless instead.

Rain responded as Hawke had thought he would.

“I know that.... But it’ll all be the same whether I leave now or later in the evening.”

Turning around without any lingering attachments, the boy walked away into the morning mist.



It was probably because he had spent too much energy that morning.

Hawke was suddenly hit with the recoil after Rain had left and his coughing fits had not stopped for a while.

He remaining sitting in his chair because it was too difficult to push himself up.

His body felt strangely heavy, as if his weight had suddenly doubled. When he placed

a hand on his forehead, he found that he clearly had a fever.

It was because he had squeezed out the few remaining drops of his dwindling stamina. His remaining time had lessened once again.

He had no regrets regarding that matter, but he could not help but regret that he had seen the boy off in silence.

He had known that the boy carried some doubts in his heart. There should have been something that Hawke could have said to him.

But, he had had so many things that he had wanted to say that when the time to part had come he had simply watched the boy go in silence.

“I’ve gotten old...”

Hawke whispered, lifelessly and in a hoarse voice.

Hawke remained at the table where they had eaten breakfast and had not attempted to move. Rather, it was more accurate to say that he could not move.

He felt like a large hole had opened up in his heart after the boy left. He had become used to Rain being nearby, and the hut, in which he was now sitting alone, was so quiet that his ears hurt.

How much time had passed as he simply sat there?

Hawke, who had been lost in thought, moved his shoulders a little. The tremors of his upper body grew, and coughs and laughter escaped his lips.

*The boy was right all along...* Hawke thought while laughing mockingly at himself.

He had always planned on taking care of things himself should it come to it, of course... but it seemed that he had finally met his fate.

Even in the grip of death, his ‘senses’ as a warrior had yet to waste away.

Just now, Hawke had noticed a large number of bloodlust approaching the hut.

According to the number of presences he felt, there were probably more people than

there had been last time...

“Haha!... How ironic. To think that they’d come at this time today of all days. Or perhaps they were simply planning to pass by. I’m sure this, too, is fate...”

Hawke stood up slowly after whispering that. For a moment, his feet faltered in a wave of dizziness, but he managed to keep himself from falling over by grabbing on to the back of the chair. When he did, his vision suddenly grew dark and his fever made everything look blurry——

But even still, he had no intention of abandoning the coming battle.

Hawke opened the door with his favored magic sword in hand.

He turned around and looked around the interior of the hut just before heading out.

He turned his head to look at the deserted room and gently smiled.

*I will never again return here in this life——*

Hawke quietly closed the door and stepped out into the chilly air.

## PART 4

They eventually left, and Hawke laid out on the blood-soaked earth and looked up at the blue sky for the first time in a long while.

They had probably already continued on to the village. Hawke wanted to get up and go to save the villagers, but, regrettably, his body refused to listen to him.

Despite that, a harsh pain ran through his body, and it was all Hawke could do to keep himself from moaning.

“Good gracious... he was quite thorough.”

The few words he had whispered caused him to regurgitate something that tasted like blood. Forcefully swallowing it down, Hawke continued struggling to get up.

He could not leave the villagers be. After all, it was his fault that things had come to this.

But, once again, he was only able to move his hand a little, and it was impossible for him to stand up.

Eventually, he even started to hear things.

——*No, that's not it.*

He hadn't been hallucinating, and he saw Rain running toward him in the midst of a strangely contorted world. When his rough footsteps drew near, the boy fell down to his knees besides Hawke and cast a cursory look at the latter's body.

“...Hey there,”

Hawke said, just like he had when they had first met, but he was met with a sharp rebuke.

“Don't talk unless you have to! I'll have a doctor examine you soon!”

Then, the boy actually began yelling in the direction of the mountain path. Apparently, the doctor was already here.

*“Hey, over here! Hurry up!”*

A few moments later, he yelled again, angrily.

*“Wait, where are you going?! Come back!”*

Hawke forced his head to turn and saw the figure of a person running away at the corner of his vision.

He smiled wryly.

*I see... He descended the mountain to find and bring back a doctor to begin with... He was planning to have a doctor examine me, even if by force.*

*No wonder he left in such a hurry...*

Hawke finally understood the reason that the boy had been in such a hurry a few hours ago. Then, he grabbed the boy's hand as the latter made to stand up and squeezed it gently.

“That's... enough. He won't make it in time anyway. He ran away after seeing me all covered in blood, no? He probably guessed who the culprit was. Virgo is well known, after all... and no one wants to get involved with him.”

“Don't be ridiculous!”

Rain spat out in rage. He continued,

“how can a doctor ignore someone who's injured!? Wait here, I'll bring him back soon and—”

His words suddenly broke off.

He had taken off Hawke's jacket and opened up the front of his shirt in a rush in order to secure Hawke's respiratory tract... and had realized just how deep Hawke's injuries ran.

The boy gasped, at a complete loss for words.

His expression collapsed and twisted, and he just barely managed to hold himself

back. His black eyes, which had always been cool and clear, were gradually dyed red as tears swelled up at their edges.

“...Don’t cry. It was only a matter of time. This is simply my retribution for ignoring your warning.”

The boy wasn’t listening.

Instead, his pallid lips whispered,

“I meant to defeat all of them and make you see a doctor before I left. But, while I found a doctor, the hideout that the townspeople told me about was vacant. So I hurried back here, and... Shit, I messed up! I swore that I wouldn’t ever go through this again!”

“——Rain.”

“I should have killed everyone when they first came here, and then went straight down the mountain to town to clean up with rest—”

“Rain!!”

Rain finally pressed his lips together when Hawke forced himself to speak louder.

Without missing that moment, Hawke said,

“my death was inevitable. You did as much for me as you possibly could. Take pride in that.”

“Don’t say that... I couldn’t even save you.”

It was not like for him for his voice to waver.

Hawke could tell only too well that the boy was blinking repeatedly in order to keep himself from crying. The aloof attitude, the cool countenance that the boy always wore like invisible armor was beginning to crumble apart.

“It’s not your fault.... Please, don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying!”

The boy stubbornly replied and firmly pressed his lips closer together.

The boy vehemently disliked exposing his 'strength.' Hawke had no doubt that the boy would sooner bite his own tongue than have others think that he was crying.

For the time being, Rain used his extreme self-restraint to return to his usual composure. He resolutely hid away the turbulent waves that ran rampant in his heart.

With a deep breath, he said in a voice that was still tinged with quivering,

"Hawke, you're beyond help. But, if I leave you be, you'll end up suffering for a little while longer.... They left you alive because they knew that."

Another violent surge of emotion crossed the boy's face again for a brief moment.

However, instead of allowing himself to break down crying, Rain continued,

"there's nothing I can do to help you. The only thing I *can* do is to keep you from suffering any longer..."

"You are kind... thank you. I'll say this as many times as it takes, but this isn't your fault. Please don't let it get to you,"

Hawke said slowly, and finally understood.

What he needed to say to the boy right now.

He hadn't been able to think of anything a few hours ago, but now, he had a clear understanding of the words he needed to give to the boy.

Yes, the boy was lost.

He did not have confidence in the path he had walked or in the path he would continue to walk from now on. No matter how hard Rain tried to hide it, it was a truth that Hawke knew only too well.

Perhaps it was because he was at death's door, but fortunately, it had become easier to breathe and the pain from his wounds were fading. Rain was about to place a hand on his magic sword as Hawke looked up.



Normally, a person would hesitate, afraid of doing something that would hurt themselves, but the boy did not turn away from what he had to do until the very end.

Hawke thought the boy was kind... no, *too* kind.

He was kinder than anyone else in the world, and yet also stronger than anyone——if Hawke had any words to give to the warrior before him, now was his final chance...

Hawke called out to Rain in a quiet tone.

“Rain——. If you are ever lost about what you need to do from now on, I want you to remember what I’m about to tell you. Because what I’m about to tell you is undeniably true.”

Indeed, there was nothing truer that Hawke could say with absolute confidence. While he was anxious for the boy when they had first met, no trace of that anxiety remained with him now.

Hawke smiled broadly.

“What is it? What is it that you want to say?”

Rain, who had drawn his magic sword, drew his head nearer. Hawke placed a hand on the boy’s cold cheek and gently spoke for him to hear.

“You will make countless decisions, countless choices, in your life from here on out. You may even find yourself lost at times. But, I’m not worried in the slightest. I can say this with confidence, even if I won’t be physically present for those times to come. — —No matter what decisions you make, what paths you choose, I trust that you will be all right. Choose the path that you believe in.”

Then, he looked at the boy who had opened his black eyes wide and spoke firmly with deep resolution.

*“Go forth without faltering. There is no error to be found in the path you’ve chosen; I’m sure you’ll do just fine!”*

The boy stared fixedly at him and said nothing for a while.

How much time had passed?

His composure broke again as he answered in a hoarse voice.

"I'll remember that, Hawke. And... thank you."

"No, I should be thanking you.... Please, save the villagers."

"——I will."

Rain nodded firmly as he raised his blue magic sword.

"I'm glad I met you... Farewell, Hawke!"

The magic sword honed in on a vital point at his voice.

Without feeling anything resembling physical pain, Hawke's consciousness sank into darkness.



Hawke's hand, which had been on his cheek, fell limply to the ground.

After looking at Hawke's peaceful face for a while, Rain returned his magic sword to its sheathe. He gathered the old man's hands beneath his chest and stood up.

He had to go and save the villagers.

Rain tore away his gaze from Hawke's face and tried to run.

However... a sharp discomfort rose from his abdomen after just a few steps.

He tried to endure it somehow, but he wasn't able to force it down now that he was alone. He remembered the feeling of stabbing Hawke's heart with his right hand and was pushed over the edges of his endurance.

He frowned as an intense pain like his intestines were twisting around ran through his body.

Rain collapsed to the earth on his knees and threw up. With enough force that he emptied the contents of his stomach.

His only saving grace was that he had vomited at the side of the road where it was hard to see his mess.

However, the nausea didn't leave him, and he only stopped after dry heaving for a while. Underneath his ragged breaths, the boy groaned with his teeth clenched in anger at himself.

Rain pounded the earth with his fists and screamed as loud as he could.

He screamed as loud as he wanted to, thinking it was fortunate that no one was around to hear.

"This weakness! This pathetic weakness!! I want to throw it all away! Just how many times do I have to relive this before I can?!"

He did not even try to contain the trembling in his voice.

After steadying his breathing, he whispered, feeling like was about to throw up blood,

"I have to get stronger. Stronger than anyone else, stronger than anything else in this world! I have to get strong enough to be able to protect the people I want to protect. ———Damnit!"

It was probably because he had thrown up and wailed to his heart's content.

In any case, he felt much better than he had a few minutes earlier.

After taking another few seconds to steady his breathing, Rain finally stood up.

By the time he had, he had already regained his composed countenance.

"...What a sorry state I'm in."

He shook his head and began running, successfully, this time.

Nothing was over yet.

There was still something he had to do.



By the time that Rain had quickly arrived at the village, the men were yelling over a mountain of vegetables and grains.

Subconsciously searching the crowd for Hannah, Rain passed through the villagers who were frozen in fear and arrived at the front of the group.

“Hey, are ya making light of us?! The hell are we supposed to do with this garbage—  
—. Hold on, the fuck are you?”

The man, who was clamoring about something, stopped to look at Rain.

“Who I am doesn’t matter. More importantly, are you the bastard called Virgo...?”

Rain stared hard at the bald giant with log-like arms.

“Aren’t you a damned cheeky one? Who the fuck do you think you are?”

Then, ZANJI suddenly cut in and said,

“Ift’s fwim! Fyoo there, look ofer here!”

Rain frowned as he looked to the source of the voice, annoyed.

He had been behind his comrades before, but now ZANJI, covered in bandages, came to the front of their group. —With one hand around Hannah’s throat and a knife pressed against her in the other.

A couple from behind Rain tried to struggle forward. Even as the other villagers held them back they screamed,

“please! Let Hannah go!”

“She’s just a child!”

Virgo roared at the desperate pair.

“Shut up! I’ve been telling you this whole time. If you want to save this brat and yourselves, then ya better bring out the real goods. Bring out the money, the damn money, and not vegetables and grains! Don’t make me repeat myself!”

Virgo’s anger extended to ZANJI as he continued,

“and you too! Don’t walk up here before I tell you to!”

“Sorry, bwoss! But, I feely want ta get mah refenge!”

ZANJI begged obstinately even as he drew back.

“...You mean that’s the brat you were talking about?”

Virgo looked at Rain in surprise and scowled. He continued,

“he don’t look that strong to me. But still... ZANJI. I get that you want your revenge. You ended up looking like that, after all.”

Likely because he felt pity after looking at ZANJI’s face, Virgo shook his head for some time and reluctantly gave his permission, saying,

“whatever... get out there and do what you want.”

“Tank, tank you, bwoss!”

Smiling jovially, ZANJI immediately stepped in front of Virgo, the leader of his group, and dragged Hannah up with him.

“Fehfehfeh! I’ll hake sure to tank you feel good!”

Rain frigidly replied,

“——what the hell are you even saying? Try again later when you’ve learned how to talk properly, idiot.”

Zanji's face suddenly flushed an interesting shade of red from between the gaps of his bandages.

Ignoring him, Rain looked straight at Hannah, who was still being held hostage.

She was calmer than he had thought she would be. Her pale lips were quivering, but she was not stirring up a fuss.

Instead, when her eyes met Rain's, she implored,

"hey, Rain... these men were saying earlier. Did they really kill grandpa?"

Rain ground his molars and silently nodded. She would know soon enough even if he lied. Hannah's eyes gradually overflowed with tears.

"Grandpa..."

"I won't make any excuses. It's my fault that Hawke died..."

Hannah lightly shook her head as she cried.

"No... I can tell. Grandpa was trying to get you to leave. I'm sure that these people came when you weren't there, Rain."

"Shat uf, you famned bwats! If you fon't stahp frying right now, I'll cut up fat pwetty face of yours!"

It was easy to understand what he was saying even if the words came out strange.

Hannah desperately clamped her mouth shut at his blatant threat. She was trying hard not to cry, but the tears kept falling down her face.

Rain held her gaze in his and smiled at her as if nothing was wrong.

"...It's okay, Hannah. It'll all be over soon. Close your eyes and listen only to my voice.... Okay?"

He didn't know if she would actually listen to him or not, but——

Hannah regained her composure as if a spell had been cast on her and even smiled a

little. She nodded obediently and closed her eyes as she was told.

Rain let out a short breath and completely changed his expression as he turned to ZANJI.

“...What happened to the people you were with before? I only see new faces today.”

“Fey all wan away cuss fey were scared of you! Fut I’m no coward! ——Fwirst, dwop your sword and seethe and come ofer here!”

Rain obediently removed his magic sword, sheathe and all, from his belt.

“I guess you at least heard the story from your friends who ran away since you’re being wary of this sword? But you’re still an idiot. If you’d ran away with them, you wouldn’t have had to die today.”

ZANJI instinctively gulped at the silent force embedded in Rain’s words. Virgo interjected from behind him.

“Don’t try anything funny! Don’t you dare think of drawing your sword or anything. It’s not like I believe it, but there’s always the one in the million. I’ll take that sword, so throw it here.”

Rain shot a glance over ZANJI at Virgo and twisted his lips into a frown.

“...You guys aren’t even worth fighting properly,”

Rain spat out and casually tossed over his sword.

Virgo, who had not thought that Rain would obediently listen, raised his hands in a panic and just barely managed to catch it.

He looked at the sword and the boy in honest surprise.

“Hmph, you’re weirdly obedient.... Well, it’s fine if it means you’ve given up.”

As a gradual smile spread across Virgo’s face, Rain asked,

“...by the way, are you the one who did that to Hawke?”

“That’s me.... Well, that old man’s got guts, I’ll give him that. He didn’t make a sound even when I was carefully cutting him up into pieces. It was pretty impressive.”

His underlings laughed sycophantically all at once as he threw back his shoulders to laugh heartily. Each and every one of them was desperate to flatter Virgo, their master.

That was why not a single one of them noticed the anger that had risen across Rain’s composed face.

“I see, so it *was* you.”

Convinced of his absolute superiority, Virgo failed to notice the ominous note in Rain’s words.

He smoothly slid the sword out of its sheathe with the vulgar smile still etched on his face. His brows, reminiscent of hairy caterpillars, furrowed as he eyed the blade.

“Hmm? What’s this, ZANJI. You said that this was supposed to be a magic sword. But it’s just a normal longsword no matter how you look at it?”

“Fwuh! N, no... affording to what I heard——”

Sensing the slight censure in his master’s words, ZANJI, who had been wary of Rain, half turned around.

That was when the situation changed.

The silver longsword that had caught Virgo’s and the others’ attention abruptly vanished.

“*Wha—!*”

Several people raised their voices at once.

While everyone was standing around with their eyes wide open in surprise, Rain alone began to act.



As soon as he had taken hold of the magic sword that had literally “teleported” in front of his eyes, he threw it a second time.

This time, however, he did not simply toss it. Instead, he speared it so fast that it whistled as it cut through the wind.

The magic sword, which had regained its magical aura the moment that it entered Rain’s hands, flew straight like a meteor.

And, just as Rain had intended, it readily skewered ZANJI’s temporal region as he tried to turn around.

ZANJI’s body twitched.

The hand around Hannah’s neck loosened, and the knife he had been holding dropped from the other.

At the same time, Rain yelled,

“run, Hannah!!”

Hannah’s reaction was impressive.

The girl had undoubtedly been waiting solely for Rain’s voice. She ran without the slightest bit of hesitation. ZANJI’s body fell heavily to the ground, as if it was trying to chase after her.

It was too late by the time Virgo and his underlings had noticed and looked over.

With her eyes still closed, Hannah had leapt straight into Rain’s arms.

“Kyah!”

“Relax! It’s me, Hannah.”

“Rain! Raiiiin!!”

Hannah, who had finally opened her eyes wide, clung on to Rain and began sobbing in relief.

She did not pull away even when her parents had come running.

“It’s okay, everything’s okay now. Here, you should get back with your parents.”

“\*sob\*... \*sob\*... O, okay. Be careful, Rain.”

Hannah somehow managed to stop crying and smiled.

The villagers, who had finally grasped what had happened, cheered. They were probably acting on reflex. There were even people who began clapping.

Their momentary excitement died down as Virgo yelled, “shut the fuck up!” in rage.

The villagers fell into silence and stepped back in fear. They all either looked away or lowered their eyes as Virgo then glared at each and every one of them in turn.

Only Rain, who was the final recipient of his glaring, kept his head high and caught Virgo’s gaze head on.

The boy, who was standing upright at his fullest height, did not display even a hint of fear and looked provocative instead.

Meeting Virgo’s haughty gaze, Rain whispered something that he had been meaning to try out.

“——Return to me!”

The magic sword promptly disappeared from ZANJI’s corpse and teleported to Rain’s hands.

“I thought it only returned to its true owner on an autonomous basis, but I guess it works when I call for it directly too.... What a mysterious sword,”

Rain commented, as if it had nothing to do with him.

Virgo hadn’t heard him.

“Playing those fancy tricks of yours. To think that you cast a spell on that sword! But you’re one real fine piece o’ work if you think it’s over already!”

“What “spell?” You’re the only piece of work here, fatty.”

Rain, who had regained his composure, returned the insult.

Then, he lowered his slender figure and brought his magic sword diagonally upwards with a small battle cry. He scythed the sword directly to the side as he brought it down.

To the people around him, Rain looked like he was making practice swings.

His violent slashing only continued.

His speed continued to accelerate, causing his sword to whistle in the air like an ominous flute summoning the dead.

Rain stopped his sword completely a few seconds later.

The trails of light left by the magic sword’s magical aura quickly disappeared.

Silently, Rain returned to his former upright posture.

Virgo, who had been looking at him from start to finish, snorted derisively.

“Hah! The hell was that supposed to be? Were you warming up or something? You can’t kill people by practicing, ya know.”

“...I wonder. I’m pretty sure it’s possible with this sword.”

“Hah ha! You need to think up of better bluffs! But I guess brats will be brats.”

*Right, boys——*

Virgo, who had turned back to his comrades to support his opinion, frowned. All of his underlings were staring into the sky with extremely blank expressions.

“...The hell, guys. What’cha blanking out for? Hey, you——”

Virgo coincidentally happened to place his hand on the shoulder of the underling closest to him. As if on cue, the man’s neck tilted and just like that——his head fell off.

Not only that, but his arm also fell off his shoulder and exploded into a fountain of

blood as it hit the ground.

“Whoa!”

Even Virgo jumped in surprised as the fountain that had once been his underling sprayed his whole body with blood.

He quickly looked around and found that all of his comrades, without exception, were falling apart into pieces, with their limbs detaching from their torsos and some even cleanly losing their heads.

Within the span of just a few seconds, the entire area was filled with the scent of blood and everyone except for Virgo was dead.

“No... way. That legend was true?”

Virgo whispered, unable to hide his fright and shock.

“I told you that you guys weren’t worth fighting properly, didn’t I——? I didn’t want to use this ranged attack, but it was a fitting death for the likes of you.”

Virgo finally looked to Rain at the latter’s cool-headed voice. His face twisted in humiliation and fear as he reproachfully yelled,

“th, that’s dirty! Using that sword is just slaughter!”

“Dirty? Slaughter? Pot, meet kettle.”

The edges of Rain’s lips curled up as he continued,

“but relax. I’ll make sure to cut *you* up myself.”

“As, as if!”

Virgo spat out as large droplets of sweat formed on his forehead.

“Technically, the ‘invisible slash’ originates from my ‘surge of power’ anyway, but...”

Rain shrugged and plunged his magic sword deep into the earth nearby. Then, he walked toward Virgo as the latter stepped back in tandem.

When he reached ZANJI's corpse, Rain removed a longsword from the body and smoothly pulled it free of its sheathe.

"Unlike you guys, I keep my promises. You'll stop complaining if I fight with this sword, yeah?"

Virgo, who was restlessly looking back and forth between Rain and his magic sword, finally started to calm down.

"Hmph... I guess you're being serious,"

he said as he scowled anew.

He drew back his self-invested fear in relief and his anger returned.

"Shit! How dare you wipe out the band that I worked so hard to build up just like that. I'll have to start all over from square one again! I'm not ZANJI, but I'll have my revenge!!"

"There's no point in you worrying about the future."

"Fuck off! I might not look it, but I once killed over fifty people in a contest of strength! You think I'll lose to you now that you don't have that overpowered sword of yours?!"

Virgo promptly drew a sword, charged forward with his gigantic frame, and landed a single blow from up high.

Rain jumped back just before it hit.

The brilliant white flash of light gorged into the earth instead.

The unrestrained blow had been so ridiculously strong that it created a large groove across the ground.

The blade of any normal longsword would have shattered.

"You bastard, you stole Hawke's magic sword. You're utterly incorrigible."

A harsh light glinted in Rain's black eyes as he looked at the radiant white longsword in Virgo's hands.

“Heh! It’s only natural for a winner to plunder the loser of his spoils!”

“Then, I’ll be the one to cut you down in Hawke’s stead!”

“Look at you bark when you’re only running away! Just dieeee!”

Virgo unleashed yet another destructive blow. This time, the silver-white aura fell down squarely above Rain’s head.

Virgo smiled in satisfaction as he split the boy from the top of his head down to his groin and the sword once again bit into the earth because of the sheer force of the blow.

“As expected of a magic sword! There was no resistance at all——”

Virgo stopped in the middle of his sentence with his mouth wide agape. Rain’s black hair, which he had been looking down on, faded away as if it was melting into the air.

“What, what the hell’s going——gah!”

He was suddenly kicked behind the knees as he tried to get back up and was forced to kneel.

“——! Nwoh!”

Then, he was kicked so hard in the back that he was afraid that his spine might snap.

Unable to bear the pain, he fell face-first into the ground. His head scraped against the ground, putting him in a posture of prostration.

He tried to get back up in a panic, but his body refused to move for some reason. The blow hadn’t been *that* hard, but he could not move no matter how much he tried.

“What do you mean, “there was no resistance”? You completely failed to see me move. That’s why I’m saying that you’re a real piece of work. You can’t beat me just by being stupidly strong,”

said a quiet voice from behind.

The shitty brat was directly behind him.

——And he was probably looking down at his defenseless back, which was so open that it was practically asking to be cut into pieces.

“Y, you damned brat, what that fuck did you do?! My body won’t move! You’re playing dirty!”

“I doubt you’d understand even if I told you, but there are several deadly vital points on the human body. The body won’t move no matter what when you hit one of them.... Just die with your head on the ground like that. It suits you.”

An awfully fierce amount of bloodlust arose from behind him in the next moment.

The pressure it released was so strong that even Virgo, who was bad at feeling presences, could feel it, and he finally understood that he faced certain death. His pride and stubbornness flew out the window.

He could not help but scream.

“W, wait! No, please wait a moment. Y, you can have my ma——”

“Too late!”

*Slash.*

Virgo’s words broke off as he felt a sharp pain at his neck for a single moment.



Rain looked down at Virgo, who was skewered in place by the sword piercing through his neck, and drew out a long breath.

He wasn’t satisfied or anything, but he felt like he had finally taken care of something that he should have taken care of a long time ago.

He stooped down and retrieved Hawke’s magic sword. Then, he collected his own magic sword with heavy steps and re-armed himself.

He only realized that the villagers were staring at him after he looked up.

Rain inadvertently stopped in his tracks because their eyes were filled with an

uncomfortable look of bewilderment and fear. Still, he tried to make sure that Hannah, who was the closest to him, was all right.

He raised a hand and said,

“Hannah, are you——”

The rest of his sentence melted into the wind and disappeared.

Hannah... the girl who always wanted to be by Rain's side no matter what, had taken a few steps backward.

Then, she suddenly realized what she had done as she looked back at Rain, who was frozen in place.

She put her hands to her mouth and apologized, “I, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to... I'm sorry!”

Rain looked at his hand, which was still reaching out to her. It was specked with blood, most likely Virgo's. It wasn't only his hand. It didn't stand out because they were black, but his clothes, too, were heavily wet with blood.

He didn't blame her... No matter what the circumstances, it was only natural for a child to be terrified after a massacre had taken place.

It wasn't limited only to children. It was the same for adults, too... Wasn't that much clear from their eyes?

Rain was exasperated by his own thoughtlessness.

In any event, he forced himself to smile and waved his hand, saying, “it's fine.” Then, Hannah's mother came running and pulled her daughter away from Rain in the blink of an eye.

“W, wait, Mama. Rain!”

Still smiling, Rain lightly raised his hand at Hannah as her mother pulled her away.

“Don't worry about it. It's only natural, and it's completely understandable.... You shouldn't be associating yourself with me.”



*Goodbye, Hannah.*

He thought that his farewell had probably reached Hannah. Though her only response was moaning.

Or rather, even had she wanted to reply, it was impossible for her to because her mother was hugging her from behind and was covering her mouth.

It seemed that her mother wanted her to completely disassociate from Rain. Rain thought Hannah's mother was doing the right thing.

He cut through the crowd and made to leave the village. The villagers hastily moved aside as he walked past.

Rain, alone and dressed in black, slipped out from the crowd.

A single person chased after him as he passed by the rows of houses and was just about to leave the village.

“——You!”

When he turned around, he saw that it was Hannah's father who had chased after him.

The tanned, simple-looking man in his forties looked anxiously at Rain.

“What?”

“It's not anything important, but... are you alright? You look pretty exhausted. You look terrible, too.”

“It's nothing. I'm just a little tired.”

“I see... that's good. And——”

He made up his mind and looked Rain in the eyes before saying,

“everyone was uncomfortable with you, but I wanted to give you my thanks. If you hadn’t come, my daughter and a few of my friends could have died... They were just about to start killing people to make good on their threats.”

The man shivered, as if he had vaguely imagined his beloved daughter’s death.

“I had my own reasons to fight. It’s not something you need to worry about,”

Rain said, before suddenly thinking of something and slowly continuing,

“...but, if you don’t mind, there’s something that I’d like to ask of you.”

“Let’s hear it. If it’s something I can do, I’ll get it done.”

“People from the government will come to clean the guys from before up——. But apart from them, Hawke’s body is lying in front of the hut down below. I meant to dig him a grave, but I think he’d be sad if I showed up all covered in blood...”

He looked at his bloodied hand and bit his lip. He continued,

“so that’s why——”

“All right, I understand.”

The man took charge of the conversation and continued,

“I owe him a lot, too. I’d be more than happy to bury him.”

“I see, thank goodness...”

Rain, who had been looking dispirited, finally smiled pleasantly and slightly lowered his head. He continued,

“thank you... that helps. Can you bury this with him too? It was Hawke’s partner in battle, after all.”

He held out the magic sword in his hand.

The man stared at Rain’s smile as if enchanted and accepted the blade.

“——And please give Hannah my best regards.”

A moment later, Rain quickly turned around and walked away.

Hannah’s father yelled out his thanks once again, but the boy simply raised a single hand in the air behind him and did not turn back around.

Bathed in the evening sun, his black hair grew smaller and smaller until it disappeared completely behind the mountain pass.

## AFTERWORD

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I was able to release the second volume of *Rain*.

Thank you so very much.

Even after releasing a book, my daily life has not changed. As always I continue days of writing every day.

If there is anything that changed, it may be that *Rain*, out of the bunch of novels I am writing, has the possibility of getting published.

I have a rather long relationship with Rain.

Even still, there are still a lot of parts that I haven't fully grasped yet, isn't there?

After all, Rain is pretty selfish and isn't honest, and on top of that he looks full of confidence while he's carrying around heavy suffering.

Even when things are really painful, if you only look at his face he is smiling fearlessly, and you can never let your guard down around him. Shelfa is probably the only one who has unwavering faith in Rain.

Actually, I feel like several of the characters in this book have been tricked by Rain's arrogant lines and brazen expression.

——Although even I, the person saying that, might be getting tricked by Rain from time to time just like them.

Because as I write *Rain*, I can't help but feel that *I* am the one who is getting pulled along by him.

Though it would be nice if I could know more about Rain after our long relationship together.

This time too, I am very indebted to many people.

As I release this book, I give thanks to all of the people who gave me their support.

And lastly, of course, I give my heartfelt thanks to you who has this book in your hands.

March 2006 Respectfully yours, Takumi Yoshino

### **Paperback Edition Afterward**

This is the second paperback edition of *Rain*.

They're coming out one after another in a short interval of time, but thank you very much to the people who have followed them from the beginning.

One of my pleasures after having become someone who writes novels is to go around bookstores.

As the words suggest, I look around various bookstores in search of my books. Normal days aside, there are many instances where I go out excitedly whenever a new book is out.

However, perhaps because my patience is poor, I never stay at one place for long, and unfortunately, I can still count the number of people whom I have seen purchase my books.

That being said, I frequently see people reading my books in the store, perhaps because they are considering it before they buy.

And perhaps it was a coincidence, whether they were reading it in the store or whether they were buying it, the people I saw were mostly older for some reason. Or rather, most of them fell between the ages of thirty~fifty. I saw too many people for it to be just a coincidence, so I probably think that there is definitely an older age group somewhere unseen.

As for why I say “somewhere unseen,” is that the average person who gives me feedback is often from the younger generation. On the other hand, as I mentioned above, the people I see holding my books in their hands are always of much older ages.

That is why I selfishly decided to think that “there must be a lot of older readers somewhere unseen.” When I think that, I become very happy.

I think that a writer’s joy is when, regardless of age or occupation, as many people read and enjoy their works as possible... Though it is somewhat difficult. I don’t know whether you who is reading this right now is a teen or an older person, but I’d be happy if you were able to spend even a little moment of pleasure.

And for the older people, many people around your age reads this, so it’s okay to please relax——I’ll just write a postscript here.

Furthermore, there is a comic edition of *Rain* drawn by artist Megumi Sumikawa. For those who not only like novels but also like comics, please check that out too.

There may be a different kind of pleasure if you read the comic edition of *Rain*.

As I release this book, I give thanks to all of the people who gave me their support.

And lastly, of course, I give my heartfelt thanks to you who has this book in your hands.

Respectfully yours, Takumi Yoshino



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